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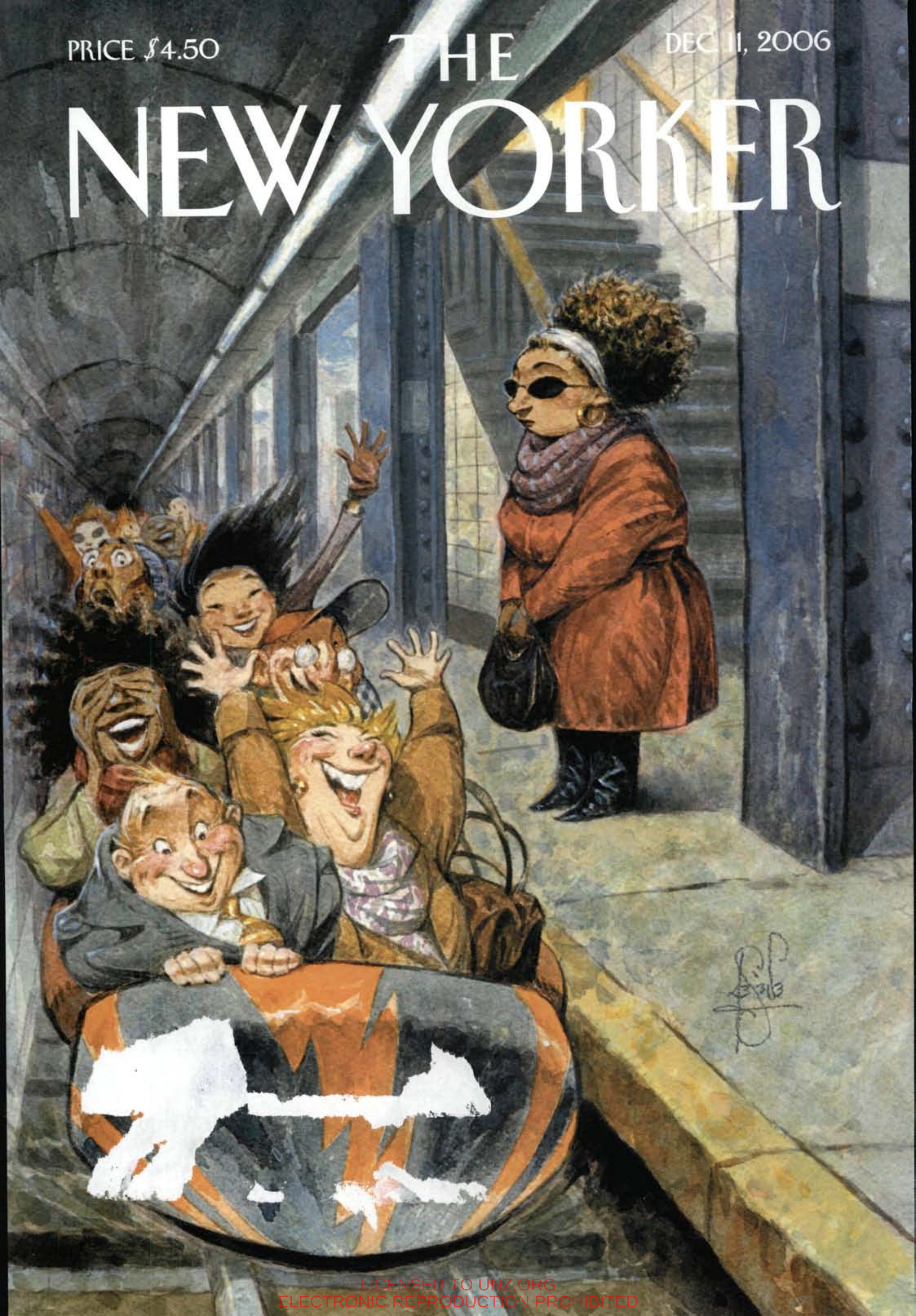
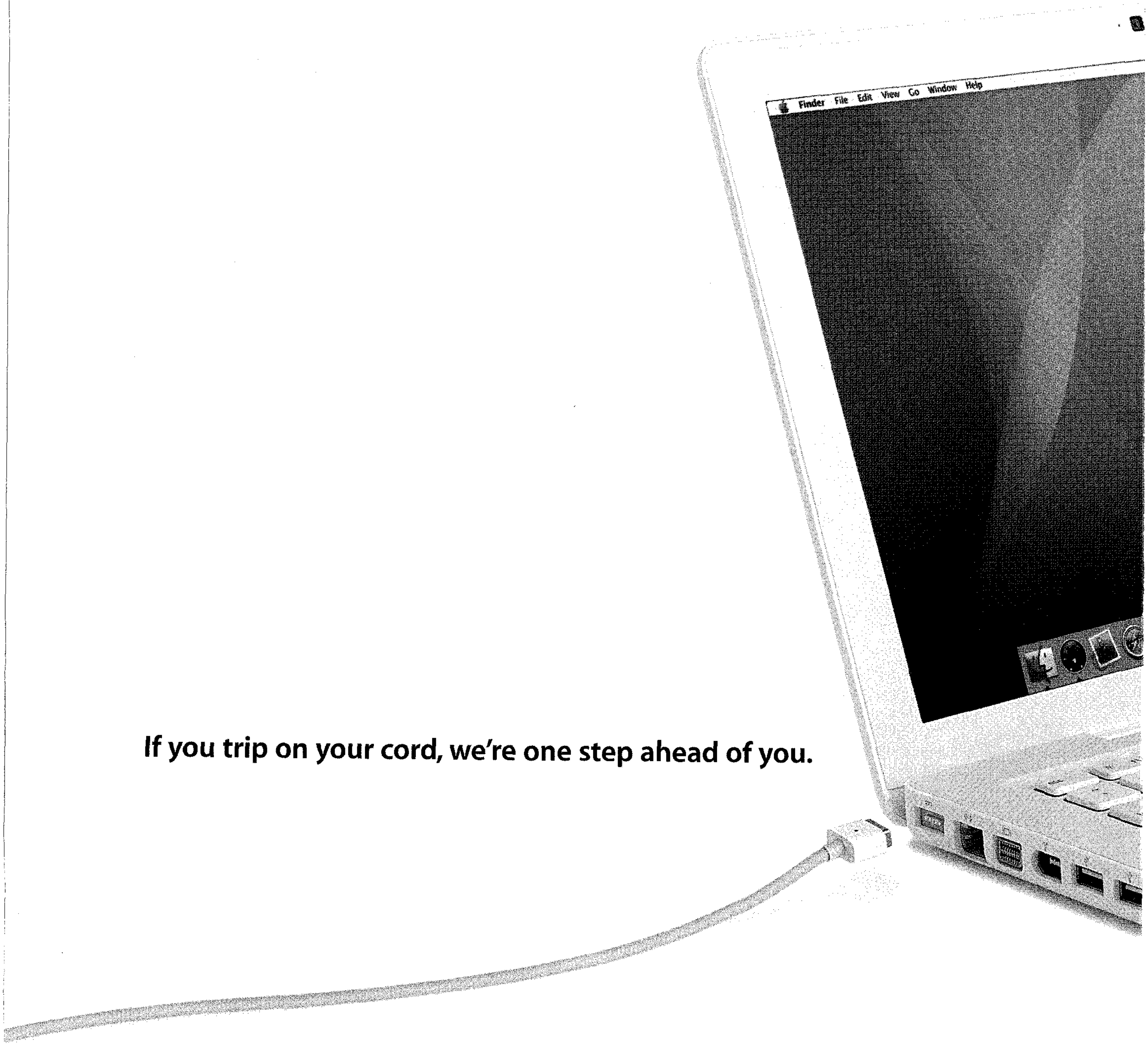
DEC. 11, 2006





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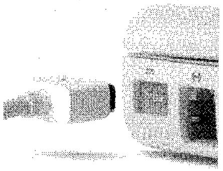

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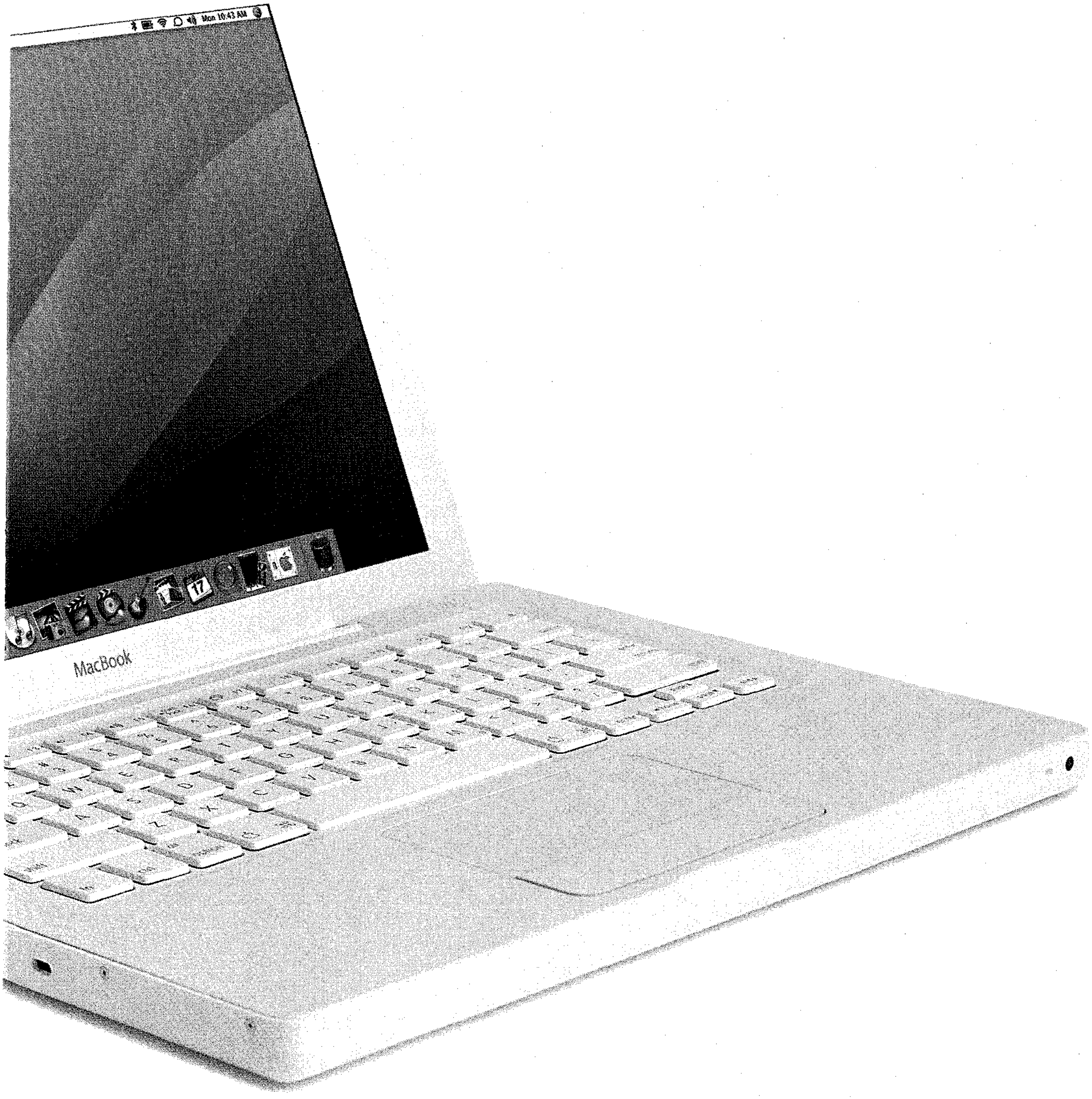

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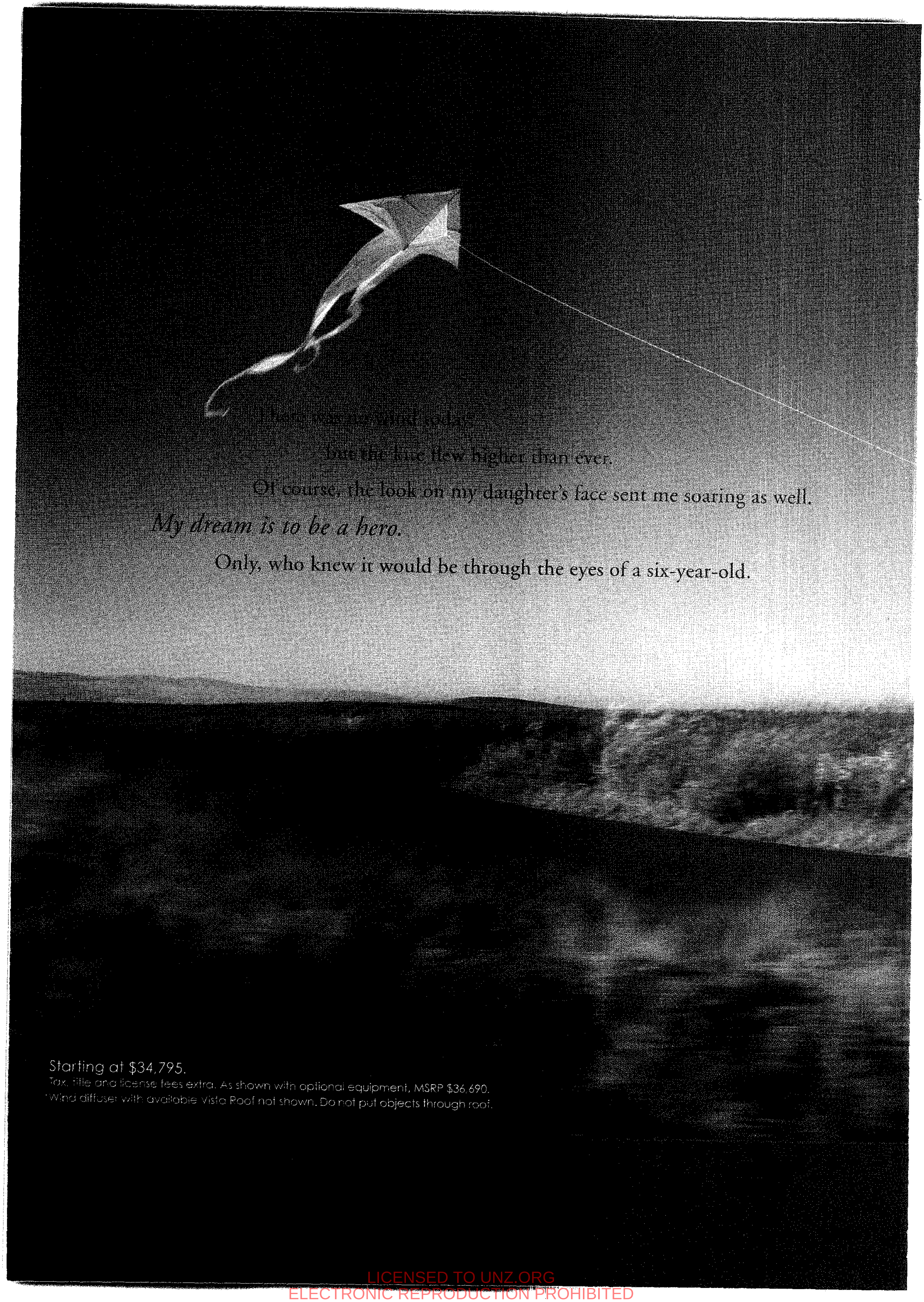
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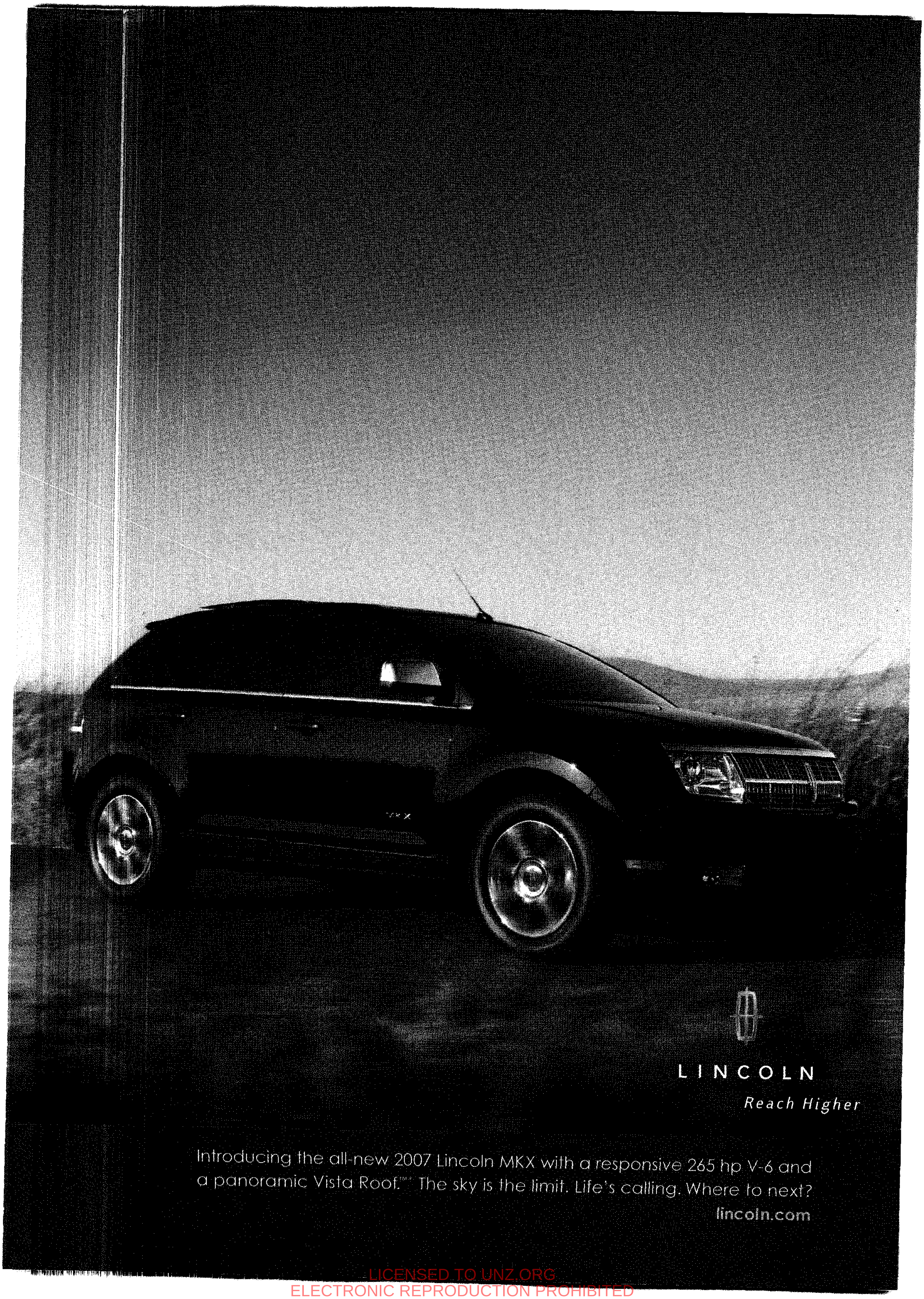
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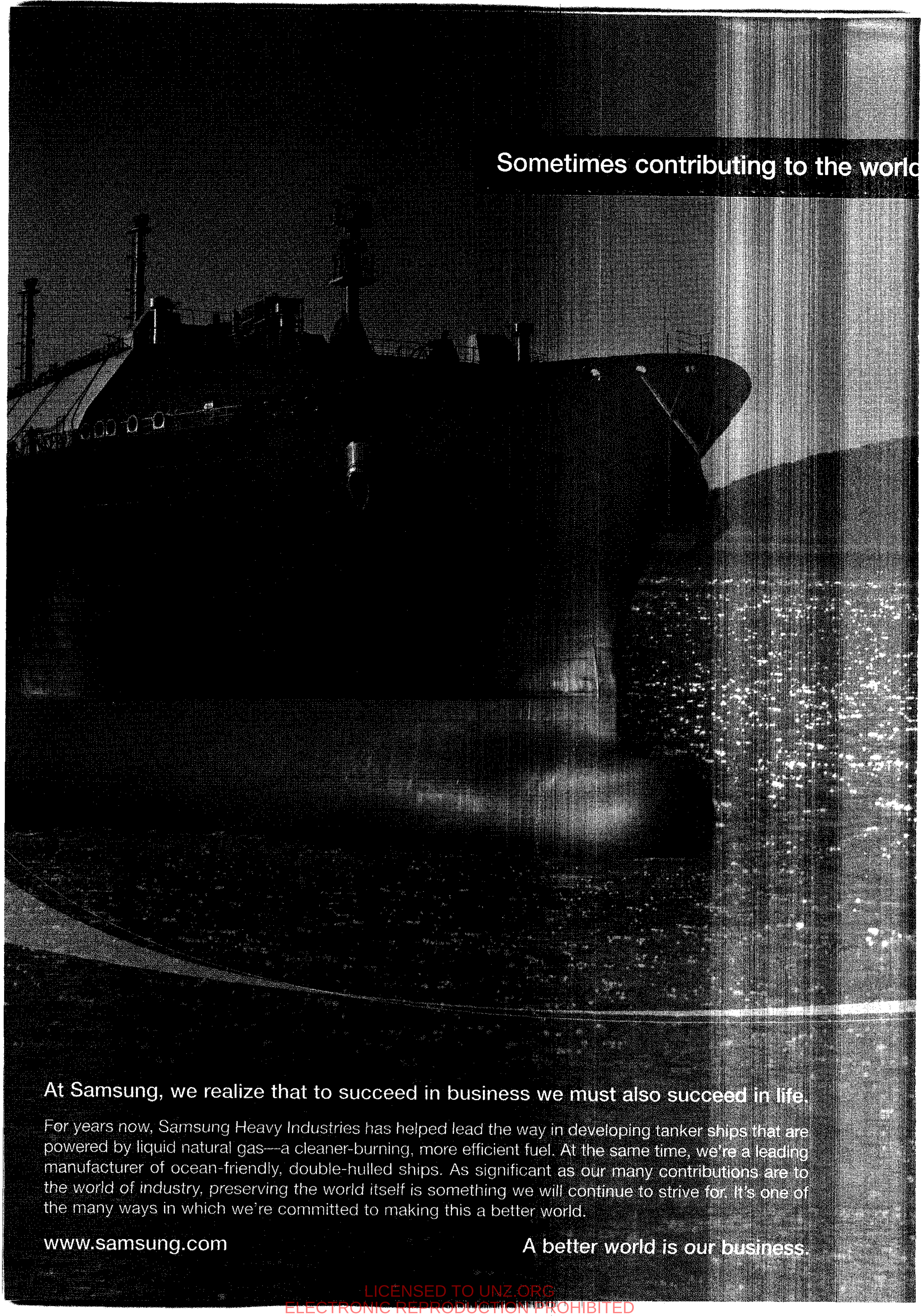

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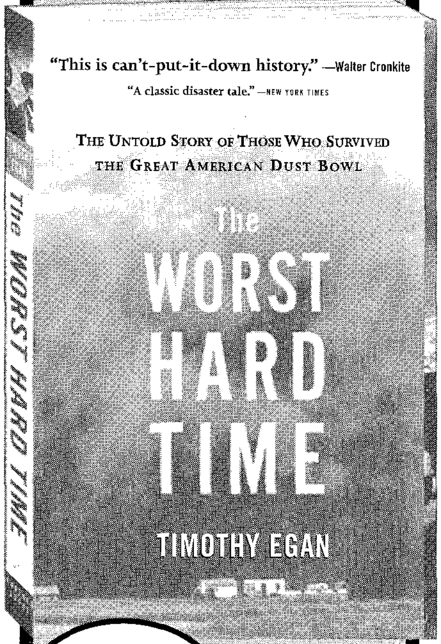

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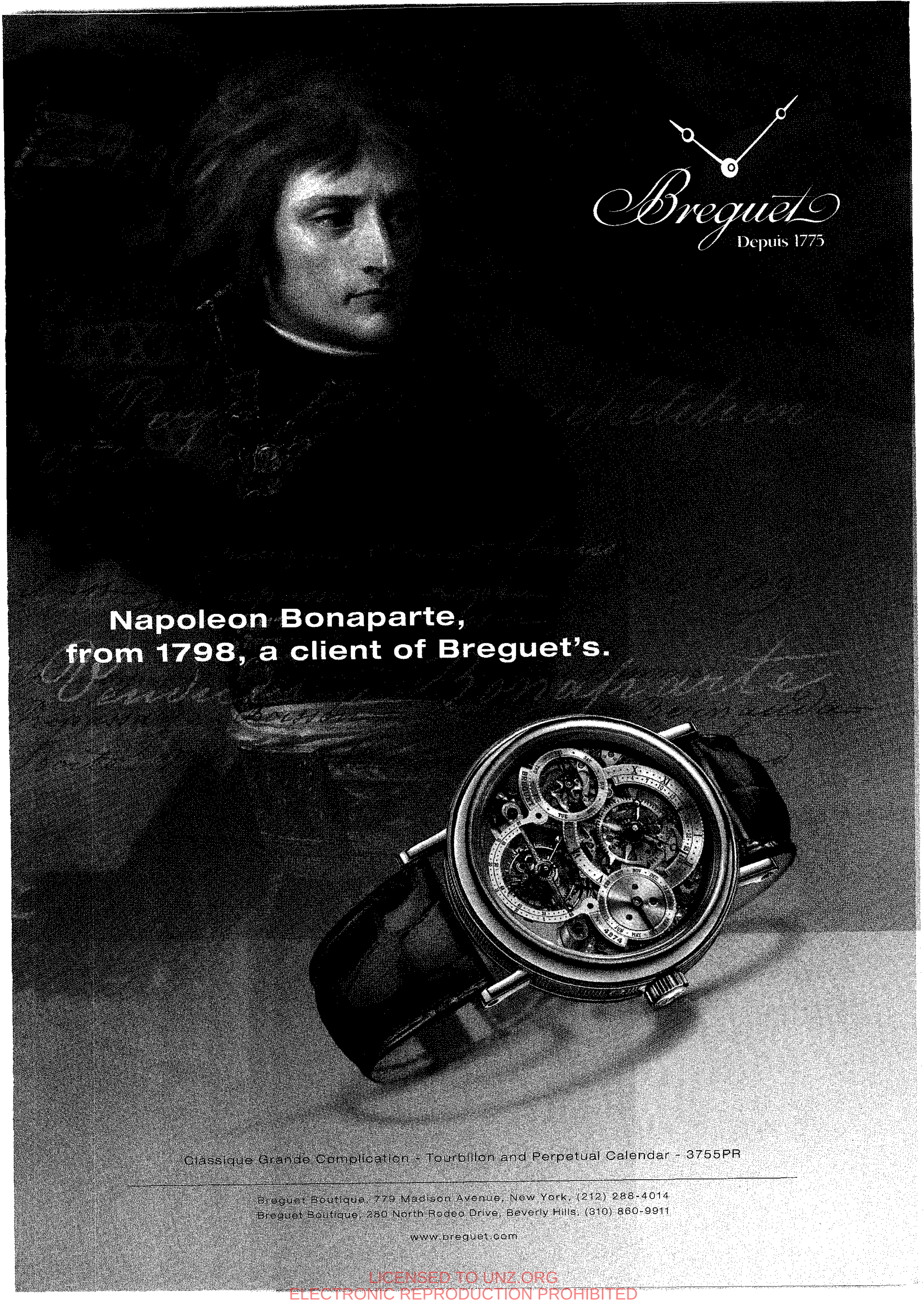

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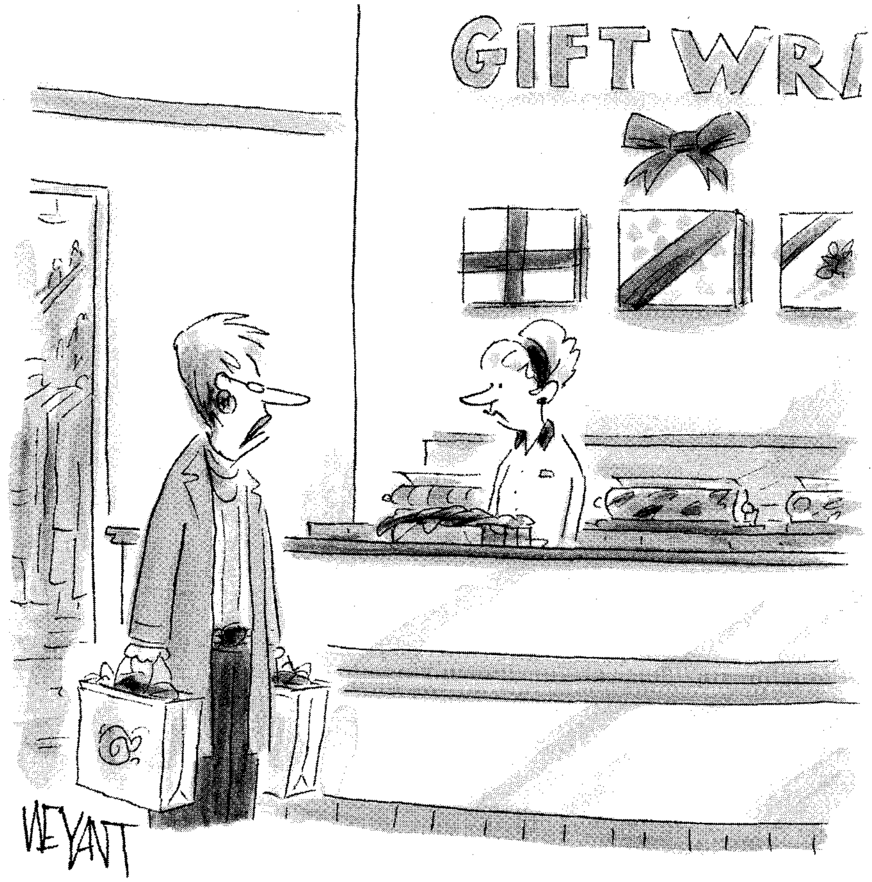
Calvin Tomkins ("The Mind's Eye," p. 76) writes about art and cultural affairs for the magazine.

Thomas McGuane (Fiction, p. 86) is the author of two short-story collections, "To Skin a Cat" and "Gallatin Canyon."

John Lanchester (Books, p. 102) has a new book, "Family Romance," a memoir, coming out in February. ◆



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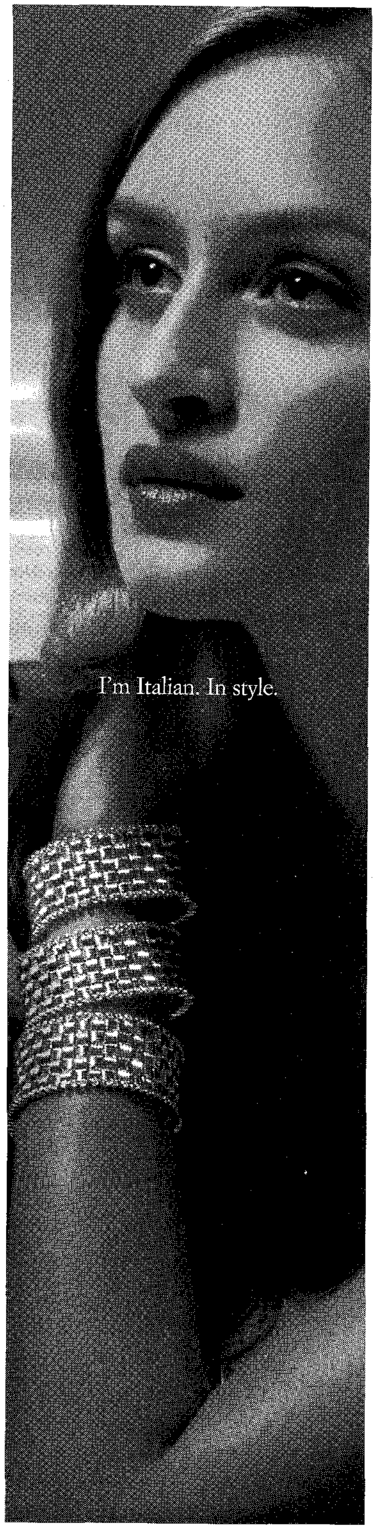
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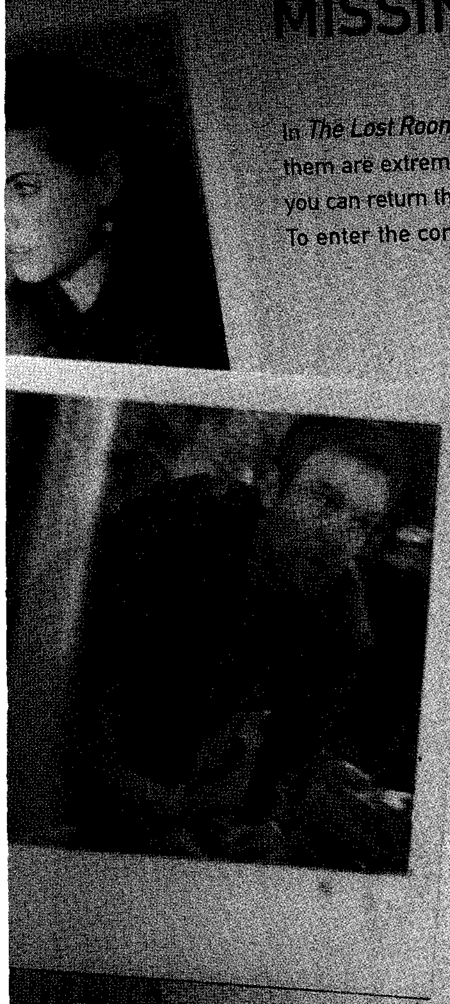

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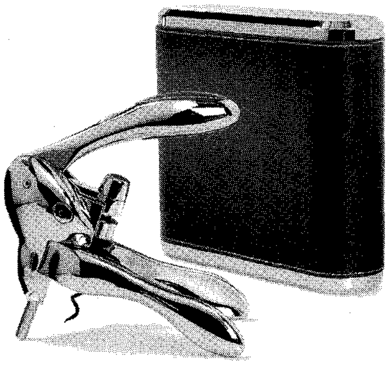

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LITERARY ENGAGEMENT

Keith Gessen, in his fine essay on Tom Stoppard's play "The Coast of Utopia" and its protagonist, Alexander Herzen, describes Herzen's "Who Is to Blame?" as being "about a love triangle" (A Critic at Large, October 30th). This seems something like calling Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin" a story of a deadly quarrel between two friends, or Lermontov's "A Hero of Our Time" a record of the amorous adventures of a junior Russian officer in the Caucasus. Like Onegin and Lermontov's Pechorin, the main character of "Who Is to Blame?," Vladimir Beltov, is one of the "superfluous men"—the literary, social, and, in the end, political category whose portrayal has resonated with every generation of Russians in the past century and a half, spurring them toward engagement with their long-suffering nation and their fellow-citizens by depicting self-destruction, despair, or dissipation as the price of resignation. In the words of the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky, Herzen's book was about "human dignity which is being denigrated by prejudice and ignorance—denigrated now by the injustice perpetrated by man toward his fellow men, now by his own [moral] distortion of self."

Leon Aron
Manassas, Va.

LEONARD AND VIRGINIA

Rachel Cohen, in her review of a new biography of Leonard Woolf, writes that when Woolf returned to London, in 1911, "the city had exchanged the cart horse for the automobile and the piano for the radio" (Books, November 13th). Although there may well have been more automobiles in 1911 London than there had been in, say, the London of 1903, when Woolf left for Ceylon, Britain's first public radio entertainment program didn't air until 1920, when Dame Nellie Melba broadcast from Marconi's Chelmsford works. (In America, Pittsburgh's pioneering KDKA first went on the air in 1920.) Certainly, if pianos had been exchanged for radio sets in 1911 London a great silence would have descended on the city.

Lawrence F. Bassett
Williamsport, Pa.

Cohen describes Leonard Woolf's letters to Trekkie Ritchie Parsons as "new love letters using the old phrases." Anyone who has read even a few of the three hundred and seventy-two letters that he and Trekkie exchanged between 1941 and 1969, which I edited for publication as "Love Letters," knows that this is unfair. Their correspondence contains some of Leonard's freest writing; his letters to Trekkie are full of passion, longing, playfulness, invention, and humor. Leonard's old friend Dadie Rylands told me that "Trekkie gave him the happiest years of his life. He was very lucky to meet her. She released him."

Judith Adamson
Montreal, Quebec

Cohen rightly credits Leonard Woolf for the countless ways in which he supported Virginia over the years. But because of a congenital tremor in Leonard's hands, most of the detailed work of running the Hogarth Press fell to Virginia—setting type, distributing copies after printing, binding and sewing the books, even wrapping them for mailing. This is not to minimize Leonard's role in the press—just to suggest, as Virginia does in a letter from 1923, that the "heavy labor" was mutual: "I assure you the Press is worse than 6 children at breast simultaneously. Leonard and I live apart—he in the basement, I in the printing room. We meet only at meals, often so cross that we can't speak, and generally dirty."

David H. Porter
Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

•

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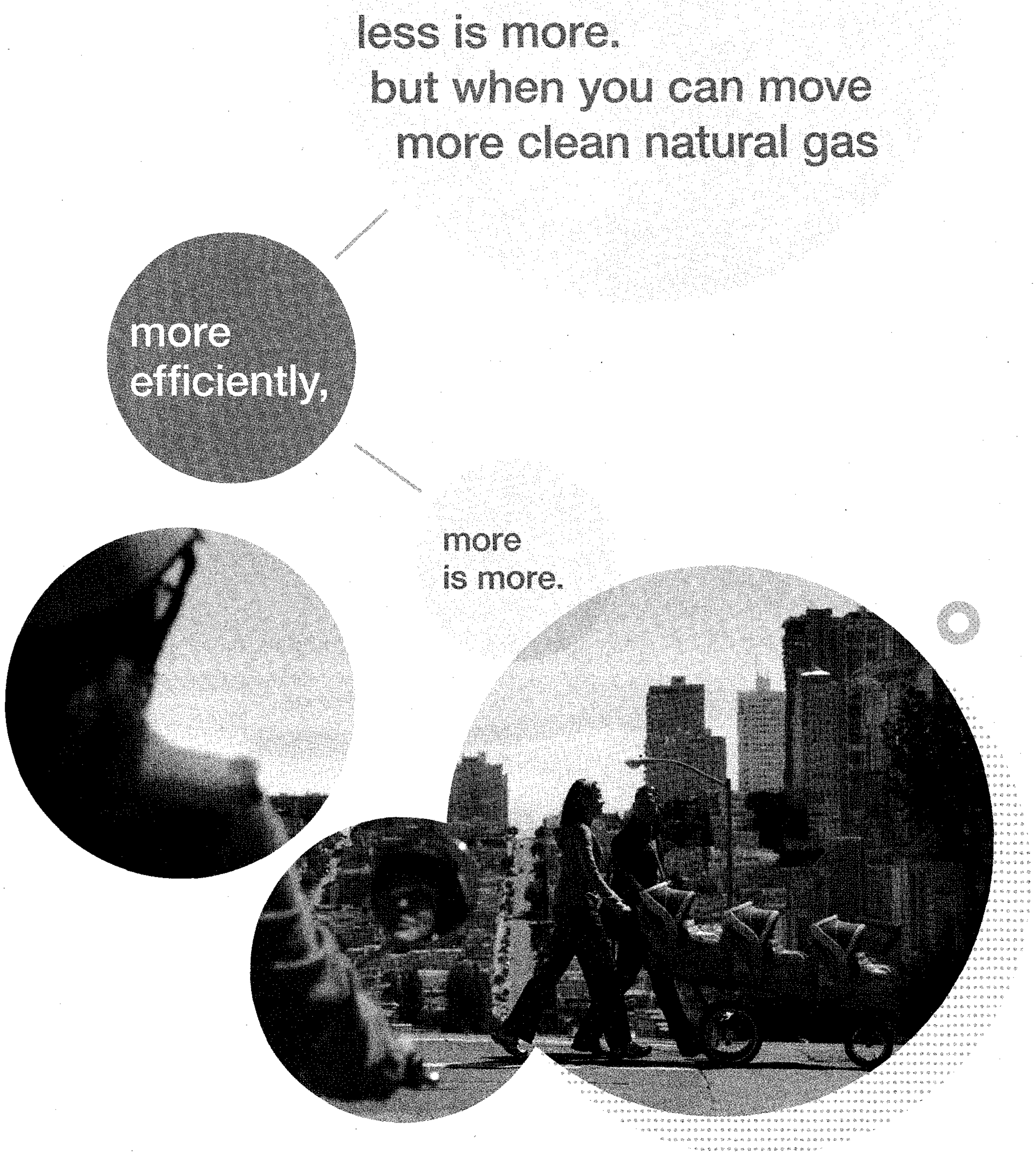
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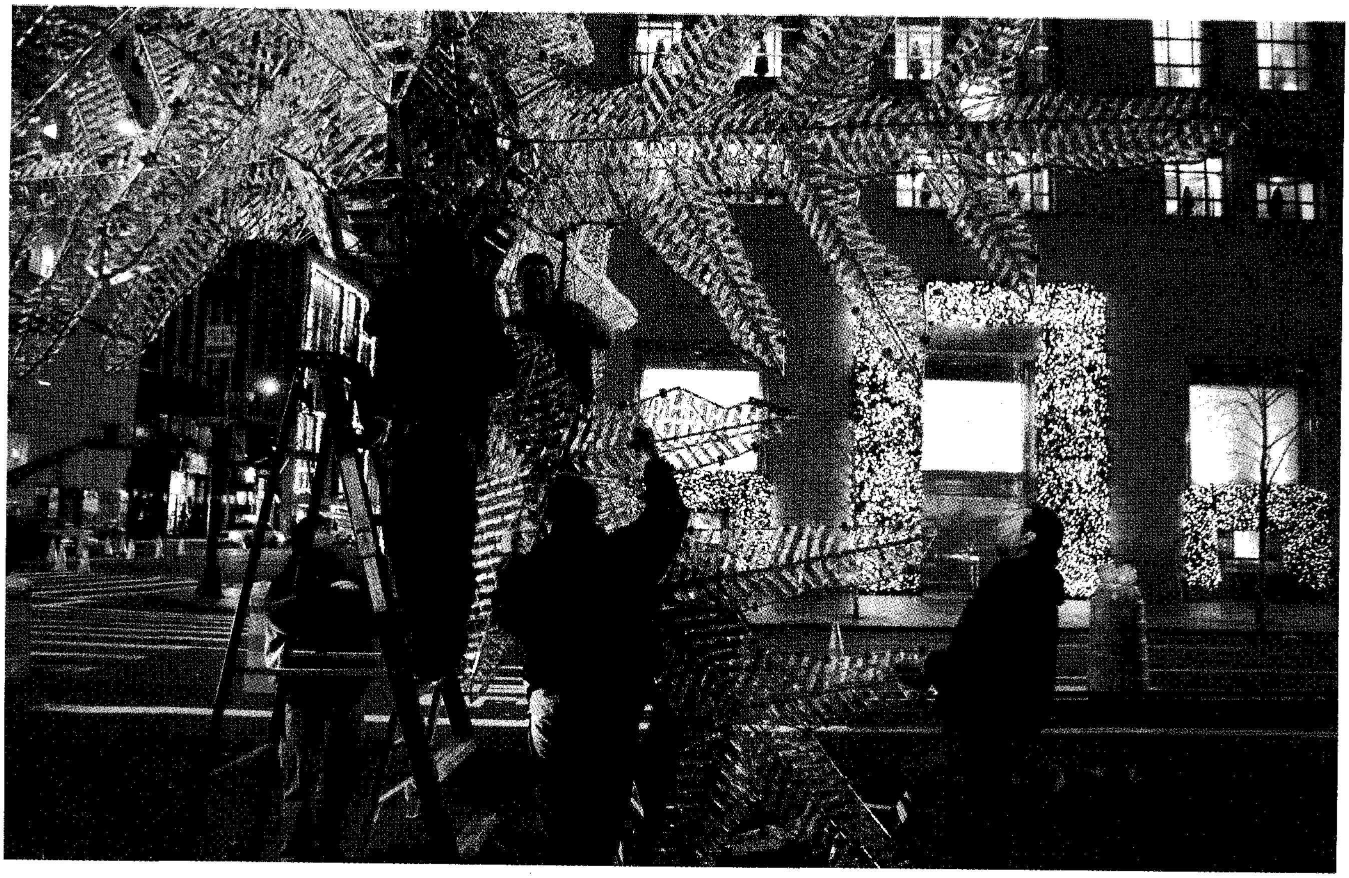

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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10	11	12	6	7	8	9

THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
HARD-KNOCK LIFE

Kathie Lee Gifford stars as Miss Hannigan in yet another revival of "Annie," at the Theatre at Madison Square Garden. Martin Charnin, who directed the original 1977 Broadway production, which won multiple Tony Awards, returns to the helm for this version. (See page 14.)

NIGHT LIFE
EAST IS EAST

Four decades ago, the raga guitarist Peter Walker hung out with Timothy Leary, George Harrison, Ravi Shankar, and other icons of the sixties. Walker dropped out of the scene in the seventies and settled in Woodstock, but he never stopped studying his instrument. Recently, Thurston Moore, Jack Rose, James Blackshaw, and a number of other musicians joined Walker on the tribute album "A Raga for Peter Walker," and his first tour in decades comes to the Knitting Factory this week. (See page 16.)

ART
FEATS OF CLAY

Ancient methods meet contemporary artistic styles in the Japan Society's "Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century," a show that celebrates the newest practitioners in the nation's long and distinguished tradition. (See page 20.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
LIFE LESSONS

As any musician knows, an ounce of experience can be worth a ton of technique. The violinist Robert Mann, who fronted the Juilliard String Quartet for half a century, joins three illustrious colleagues for a quartet concert at the Metropolitan Museum. (See page 26.)

MOVIES
THE INSIDE STORY

Jacques Rivette's "Out 1," from 1971, runs twelve hours and forty minutes. Based loosely on Balzac's novel "History of the Thirteen," about a secret society of hedonistic provocateurs, the story concerns two theatre companies mounting rival productions of Aeschylus. Its screening at Moving Image is its American première; it will be shown over two days. A box dinner is available. (See page 30.)

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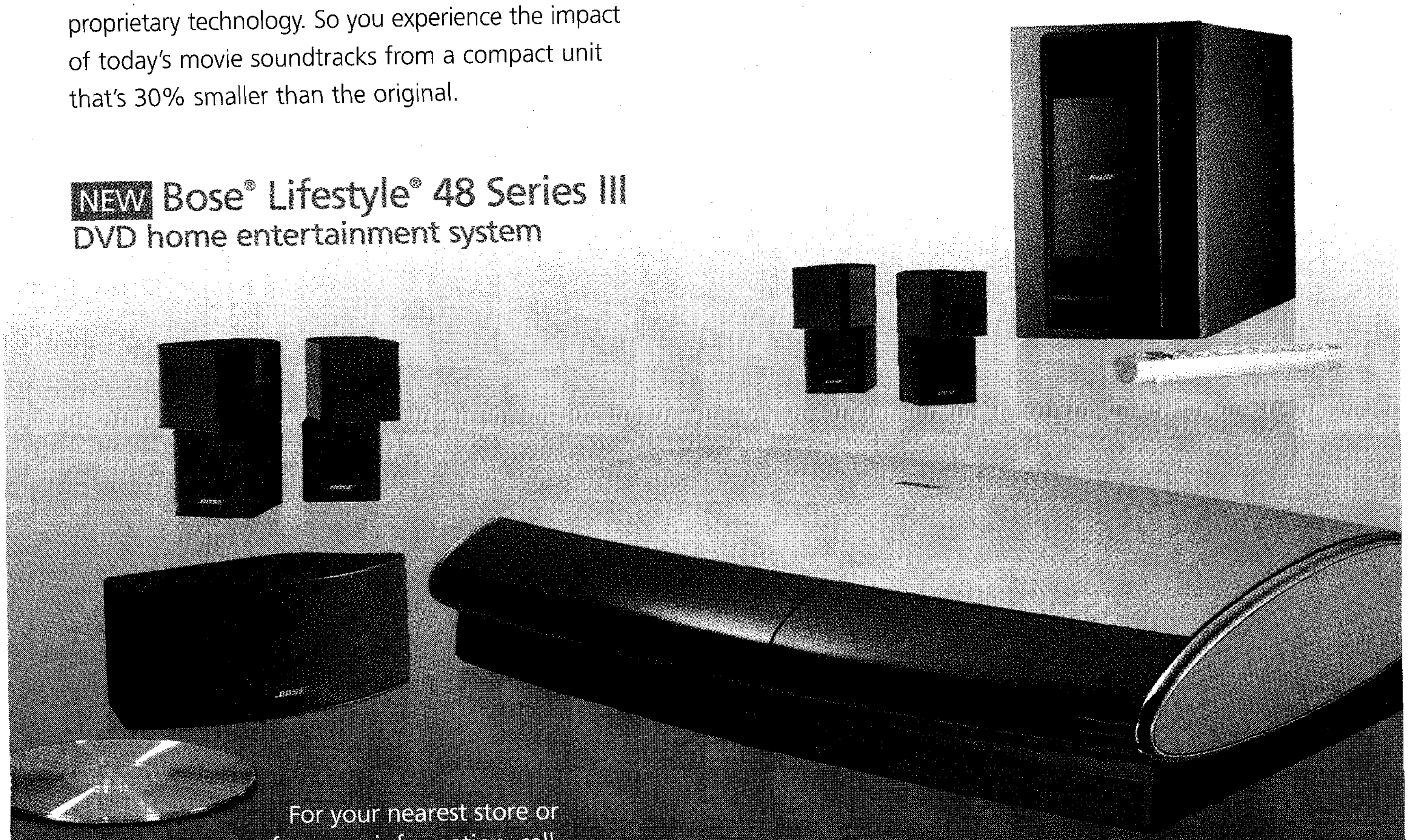

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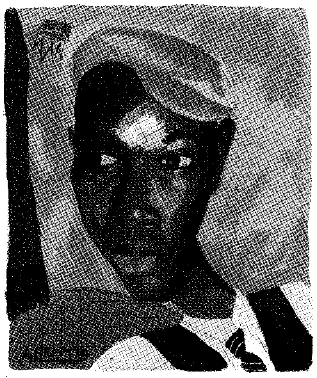
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
YOUNG BLOOD

Since its inception, in 1968, the Yale School of Drama's Cabaret has showcased a number of burgeoning theatrical talents. Located in the basement of a Gothic structure, the Cabaret serves drinks in an atmosphere thick with the ghosts of Christopher Durang, Meryl Streep, Sigourney Weaver, and other alumni. In recent weeks, it has thrown open its doors to the up-and-coming director Michael Walkup (Dramaturgy, '06), the future stars Tom E. Russell and Gilbert Owuor (both Acting, '07), and the playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney (Playwriting, '07). McCraney's "Run, Mourner, Run"—adapted from a story by Randall Kenan—handles sexuality and lyricism with a power reminiscent of Tennessee Williams and an experimentalism redolent of Jean-Claude van Itallie. McCraney's piece polarized audiences, but there is no doubting his exceptional gifts as a dramatist. McCraney has been embraced by the Public Theatre, where his play "The Brothers Size" will be performed Jan. 18-28, in the "Under the Radar" festival. Watch for it.

—*Hilton Als*



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THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

ANNIE
Kathie Lee Gifford plays Miss Hannigan, in a revival of the 1977 musical. Also starring Conrad John Schuck, as Daddy Warbucks, and Marissa O'Donnell, as Annie. Opens Dec. 6. (Theatre at Madison Square Garden. 212-307-7171.)

THE APPLE TREE
Kristin Chenoweth stars in this musical from 1966, based on three stories of temptation, by Mark Twain, Frank R. Stockton, and Jules Feiffer. Gary Griffin directs. In previews. (Studio 54, 254 W. 54th St. 212-719-1300.)

CARRIE
The première of Theatre Couture's camp take on Stephen King's tale of high-school horror, featuring Sherry Vine and visual effects by Basil Twist. In previews. Opens Dec. 10. (P.S. 122, at 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101.)

THE COAST OF UTOPIA, PART TWO: SHIPWRECK
The second chapter in Tom Stoppard's trilogy about a group of Russian intellectuals. In previews. (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200.)

HIGH FIDELITY
Walter Bobbie ("Chicago") directs this musical based on Nick Hornby's best-selling novel, about a record-store owner whose girlfriend breaks up with him. In previews. Opens Dec. 7. (Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

HOME
The Actors Company Theatre presents David Storey's 1970 drama, in which four companions discuss life during a walk in the park. Cynthia Harris and Simon Jones star. In previews. Opens Dec. 7. (Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

MY MOTHER'S ITALIAN, MY FATHER'S JEWISH & I'M IN THERAPY!
Steve Solomon wrote and stars in this autobiographical comedy. In previews. Opens Dec. 8. (Little Shubert, 422 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

POWER OF TEN: PLAYS THAT COUNT
Frances McDormand and Peter Dinklage are among the performers participating in this free 52nd Street Project event, which brings together kids from Hell's Kitchen and theatre professionals to present original plays. Dec. 8-10. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. For reservations, which are required, call 212-642-5052.)

SPRING AWAKENING
This musical, which originated at the Atlantic Theatre Company, is based on Frank Wedekind's play from 1891, about the secret inner lives of teen-agers. With music by Duncan Sheik, book and lyrics by Steven Sater, and choreography by Bill T. Jones. Michael Mayer directs. In previews. Opens Dec. 10. (Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200.)

THAT TIME OF THE YEAR
A musical revue of Christmas and Hanukkah songs from the York Theatre Company, directed and choreographed by Annette Jolles. In previews. Opens Dec. 7. (Theatre at St. Peter's, 54th St. east of Lexington Ave. 212-935-5820.)

A VERY MERRY UNAUTHORIZED CHILDREN'S SCIENTOLOGY PAGEANT
The return of the Les Freres Corbusier hit, in which a cast of grade-school children bring the famous Scientologists Tom Cruise, Kirstie Alley, and John Travolta and Scientology's founder, L. Ron Hubbard, to life in a mock Christmas pageant. In previews. Opens Dec. 10. (4th Street Theatre, 83 E. 4th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE VOYSEY INHERITANCE
Atlantic Theatre Company presents the New York première of David Mamet's adaptation of Harley Granville-Barker's play, about a family whose patriarch has acquired their money by embezzlement. Opens Dec. 6. (336 W. 20th St. 212-239-6200.)

NOW PLAYING

THE AMERICAN PILOT
The Scottish playwright David Greig's provocative drama, presented by Manhattan Theatre Club, takes place in the revolutionary south of an unnamed Middle Eastern country, where ceaseless war has eroded any hope of a stable future. A wounded American Air Force officer (Aaron Staton) is rescued from a crash site by a bewildered farmer (Ron Domingo) and given shelter, and his presence becomes a touchstone for the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that the rural people feel for the superpower that controls their military and puppet government. The blond American with the shattered leg becomes both a talisman and a threat to the insurgent Captain (Waleed Zuaiter) and his translator; they can't decide whether to execute the captive (and send the video to CNN) or keep him alive—and in their power. Greig's Brechtian first act is full of taut, intelligent writing, but the second act sacrifices the fierce momentum. (City Center, Stage II, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

BARN SERIES FESTIVAL
The annual reading festival presented by LAByrinth Theatre Company includes new works by Rebecca Cohen, Cusi Cram, and Stephen Adly Guirgis, among others. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-513-1012. For complete schedule, visit www.labtheater.org.)

THE COAST OF UTOPIA, PART ONE: VOYAGE
The first of three plays by Tom Stoppard about a group of nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals. The ensemble cast includes Ethan Hawke, Brían F. O'Byrne, Jennifer Ehle, and Billy Crudup. (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200.)

COMPANY
John Doyle directs Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's Tony Award-winning musical from 1970. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

DARK MATTERS
When a woman named Bridget Cleary (Elizabeth Marvel) vanishes from her car in rural Virginia, her husband (Reed Birney) calls in the local sheriff (Michael Cullen) to help solve the mystery. Jeremy (Justin Chatwin), the teen-age son, discloses that his mother believed that she'd established contact with aliens prior to her disappearance, but the gruff sheriff is intent on untangling a mesh of earthly lies and half-truths. The playwright, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, offers both natural and supernatural glosses on Bridget's peculiar game of hide-and-seek, but his writing strains the bounds of credibility, leaving one with the sense of having witnessed an overstuffed "Twilight Zone" episode. (Rattlestick, 224 Waverly Pl. 212-868-4444.)

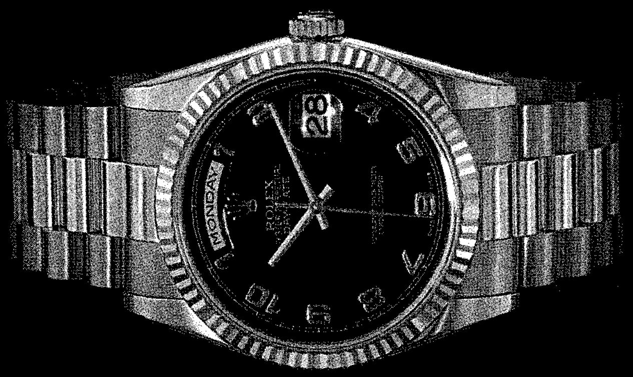
THE DREAMER EXAMINES HIS PILLOW
Ditto Productions presents a revival of John Patrick Shanley's drama from 1986, in which a young woman discovers that her boyfriend has been sleeping with her younger sister. (Ohio, 66 Wooster St. 212-352-3101.)

DURANGO
Julia Cho's latest drama has an indie-movie premise: fired from his job of twenty years, the widower Boo-Seng Lee (James Saito) takes his two alienated sons on a family road trip across Arizona. Cho hits on all the mainstays—the arguments, the stops for fast food, the weighty revelations, the flashbacks to pivotal events. There's a good son, Jimmy (Jon Norman Schneider), a bottled-up thirteen-year-old, and a bad son, Isaac (James Yaegashi), an explosive twenty-one-year-old. Even though there's nothing fresh here, the frank, unaffected actors (directed by Chay Yew) breathe life into the shopworn lines, drawing out their underlying tenderness. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Through Dec. 10.)

HOW TO SAVE THE WORLD AND FIND TRUE LOVE IN 90 MINUTES
Seth Weinstein wrote the music and Jonathan Karp wrote the book and lyrics to this undemanding offering, which gives the age of terrorism a peppy—and irrelevant—spin. Miles Muldoon (Michael McEachran) is a lowly United Nations bookstore clerk who is hit on the head with a melon by Gua-

APPARENTLY,
TIME OFF IS RESERVED
FOR THOSE WHO CONSIDER THEIR CAREER AS WORK.

After more than 40 years, Plácido Domingo's generosity refuses to wane. His passion for giving has led him to astonish audiences in over 4,000 performances. Moreover, it inspired him to found Operalia: a unique event to discover opera's future talent. It seems that at some point, even Plácido should take a break. But, given his personality, this is rather unlikely.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temalan protesters. As a result, he develops telepathic powers that alert him to a bioterrorist scheme, which he must overcome his cravenness in order to stop. The ninety minutes allotted to him are occupied with high-speed costume changes, quippy metatheatrical asides, and all sorts of zestful shtick, but most of it amounts to musical-comedy filler, with very little payoff. (New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

KAOS

Martha Clarke adapted parts of four Luigi Pirandello stories from the Taviani brothers' 1984 film, "Kaos." In Italian, with English supertitles. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-239-6200.)

REGRETS ONLY

In a new comedy by Paul Rudnick, presented by Manhattan Theatre Club and directed by Christopher Ashley, Christine Baranski plays Tibby, a Park Avenue socialite whose husband (David Rasche) is drafted by the White House to consult on a same-sex-marriage ban, much to the vexation of her gay best friend, a world-class fashion designer (George Grizzard). And so Tibby, her loyalties divided, is forced to choose between a life of naïve extravagance and one of politically aware extravagance. Rudnick supplies his leading lady with an arsenal of memorable punch lines—and Baranski, with her singsong hauteur, may be the perfect vessel for his droll wit—but he seems reluctant to take his characters to task for their complacency, preventing the play from reaching its potential as social satire. (City Center, Stage I, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

SCHOOL FOR WIVES

Shepard Sobel's production of Molière's prickly comedy is oddly frictionless: this amiable Arnolphe (Dan Daily) moves smoothly in and out of crises, chatting up the crowd in between attempts to lock up his virgin bride. The intimate space—decorated with a phalanx of identical curtains that scoots the actors downstage—creates a comedy-club-like setting for the monologues and slapstick bits. But attempts to skirt the dated gender politics by replacing bile with soda pop only work up to a point: it's very perplexing to see a likable Arnolphe terrorizing a girl half his age. (Pearl, 80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

TWO SEPTEMBER

The Flea presents a play by Mac Wellman, about the rise of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam after the Second World War. Loy Arcenas directs. (41 White St. 212-352-3101.)

TWO TRAINS RUNNING

Signature Theatre Company continues its August Wilson series with this portrayal of a Pittsburgh diner in 1969. (Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

THE VERTICAL HOUR

Julianne Moore and Bill Nighy star in David Hare's new play. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

Also Playing

ARMS AND THE MAN: Pearl, 80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802. **BHUTAN:** Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 212-239-6200. Through Dec. 9. **A CHORUS LINE:** Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **THE CLEAN HOUSE:** Mitzi E. Newhouse, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200. **DR. SEUSS' HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS!—THE MUSICAL:** Hilton, 213 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4100. **GREY GARDENS:** Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **HEARTBREAK HOUSE:** American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. **THE LITTLE DOG LAUGHED:** Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **MARTIN SHORT: FAME BECOMES ME:** Bernard B. Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **MARY POPPINS:** New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4747. **NO CHILD . . . :** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-239-6200. **AN OAK TREE:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-239-6200. **SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER:** Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. **THE WEDDING SINGER:** Al Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL

237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—Dec. 8: The **Dan Band,** the Los Angeles group that appeared in the movie "Old School." Dec. 9-10: The rock legend **Ronnie Spector** holds her very own Christmas spectacular. Dec. 11: The dancehall star **Sizzla.**

The guitarists Marc Ribot and Vinicius Cantuária play duets at Joe's Pub this week.

PATRICK LONG

BEACON THEATRE

Broadway at 74th St. (212-307-7171)—Dec. 12-13: **Damien Rice,** an exceedingly romantic Irish singer-songwriter, gained a great deal of attention three years ago for his début album, "O," a collection of understated gems. He recently released a follow-up, "9."

IRVING PLAZA

17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—Dec. 7: Houston's **Blue October** is a confrontational quintet that plays blistering, confessional rock. Dec. 8: A holiday show with the rootsy, plain-spoken rock band **Marah,** which emerged out of Philadelphia in 1998 with the CD "Let's Cut the Crap and Hook Up Later on Tonight." Since then, they've delivered a number of solid albums and attracted the attention of such heavyweights as Bruce Springsteen and the writer Nick Hornby.

JOE'S PUB

425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—Dec. 6: **Carla Bozulich** comes from the same West Coast scene that gave birth to the likes of Jane's Addiction. After a brief stint with the industrial group Ethyl Meatplow, she formed the Geraldine Fibbers, who played a skewed blend of country-rock; as a solo artist, Bozulich ventured further into country territory, even collaborating with Willie Nelson. Her latest release, "Evangelista," however, is an earnest post-rock experiment recorded with members of the Montreal collective Godspeed! You Black Emperor. Dec. 8: **Vinicius Cantuária,** a guitarist, percussionist, singer, and songwriter who hails from Brazil (he used to tour as a drummer with Caetano Veloso), performs sweet and delicate songs that evoke Gilberto Gil and Jobim. Since moving to New York, in the mid-nineties, he's collaborated with the likes of Arto Lindsay, David Byrne, Ryuichi Sakamoto, and Bill Frisell. Here he joins the downtown guitarist **Marc Ribot,** for whom he penned the song "Cubanos Postizos," a tribute to the latter's band of "prosthetic Cubans." The two will play an intimate, largely acoustic set featuring compositions, new and old, from their respective repertoires.

KNITTING FACTORY

74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (212-219-3055)—Dec. 9: The local outfit **Skeleton Key** emerged in the mid-nineties, pairing a percussive junk-rock aesthetic with the surrealist wit of Tom Waits at his most eccentric. Rickety and explosive by turns, the band—led by the former Lounge Lizards bassist and accomplished marionette-maker Erik Sanko—is a tirelessly original act and a dizzying live spectacle. Dec. 12: In the sixties, the raga guitarist **Peter Walker** was, among other things, Timothy Leary's music director (he came up with the musical programs and performed songs during the psychedelic preacher's lectures and "celebrations"). He also studied with Ravi Shankar, alongside George Harrison, and recorded two seminal albums for Vanguard in the late sixties that fused flamenco, American folk, and Indian classical music. Walker, who's been quietly honing his craft (and performing with Gypsies in Spain) since dropping off the scene in the early seventies, recently released a beautiful new record called "A Raga for Peter Walker." The album, his first in thirty-seven years, contains tributes from such contemporary devotees as Thurston Moore and **Jack Rose** (who is opening for him here) alongside several eerie and inspired Walker performances that evoke an imaginary land bordering on both the Smoky Mountains and the Ganges.

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

Seventh Ave. at 33rd St. (212-307-7171)—Dec. 8: **Dashboard Confessional's** singer-songwriter, Chris Carrabba, made the hardcore-punk scene safe for sensitive guys with the 2001 album "The Places You Have Come to Fear the Most." His fire somewhat stolen by the subsequent success of such higher-profile bands as Fall Out Boy, Carrabba continues to traffic in heartstring-tugging songs. With the punk-pop band **Brand New.**

REBEL

251 W. 30th St. (212-695-2747)—Dec. 8: **Exene Cervenka** is best known for her deliberately off-kilter harmonizing with John Doe in the Los Angeles punk institution X. While that band still exists, Cervenka directs much of her creative energy into the **Original Sinners,** a rollicking, rootsy band not especially unlike X.

WARSAW

261 Driggs Ave., Brooklyn (718-387-0505)—Dec. 12: The pro surfer turned singer-songwriter **Donavon Frankenreiter** steps away from the mellow acoustic sound of his mentor, Jack Johnson, for his organ-fuelled, soulful sophomore release, "Move by Yourself."

ZEBULON

258 Wythe Ave., between Metropolitan Ave. and N. 3rd St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-217-

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[illegible] wedging a mastodon into a marmot hole. We small cars take for granted the joy of [illegible] through the city's nooks and crannies in time to catch the previews, or finding a seat in front of [illegible] guy. So we're giving big cars a handy tool for locating the parking oasis in a desert of red and yellow curbs. Because we also know what it's like to be big—we overinflated our tires one day and nothing felt quite right. **BIG CARS, WE FEEL YOUR PAIN.**

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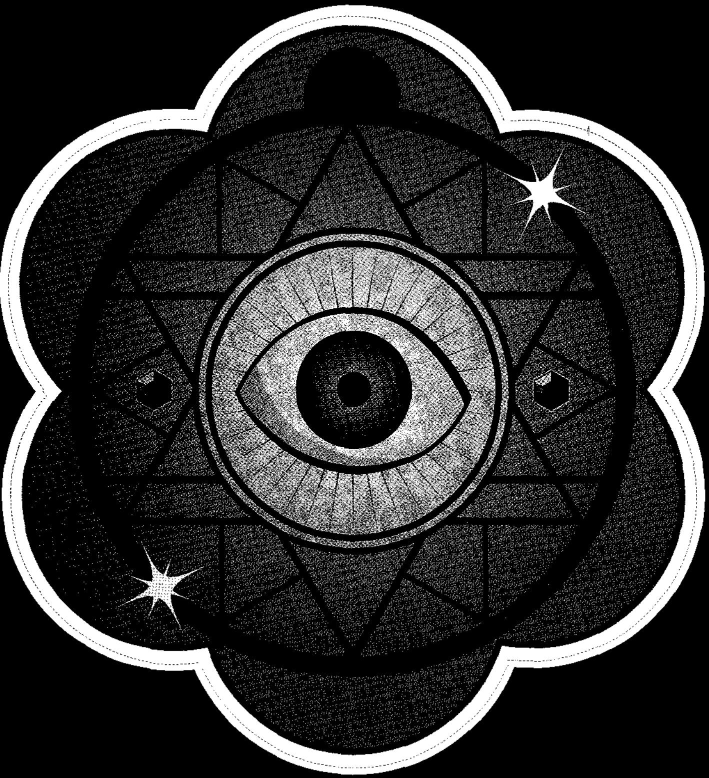
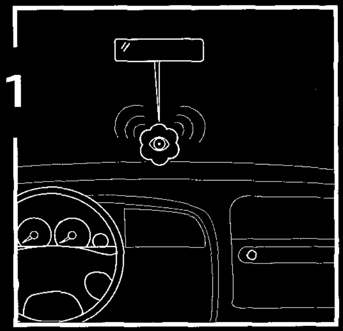
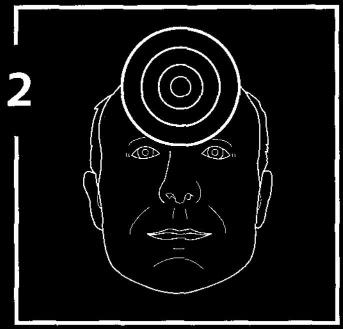
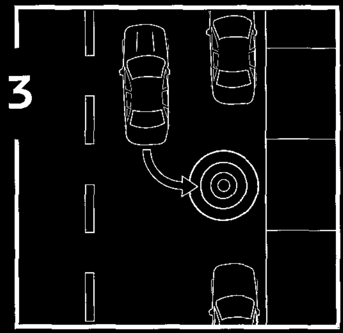




String amulet with a magic conduit (shoelace or dental floss is fine).



Concentrate to activate the amulet's definitely real parking powers.



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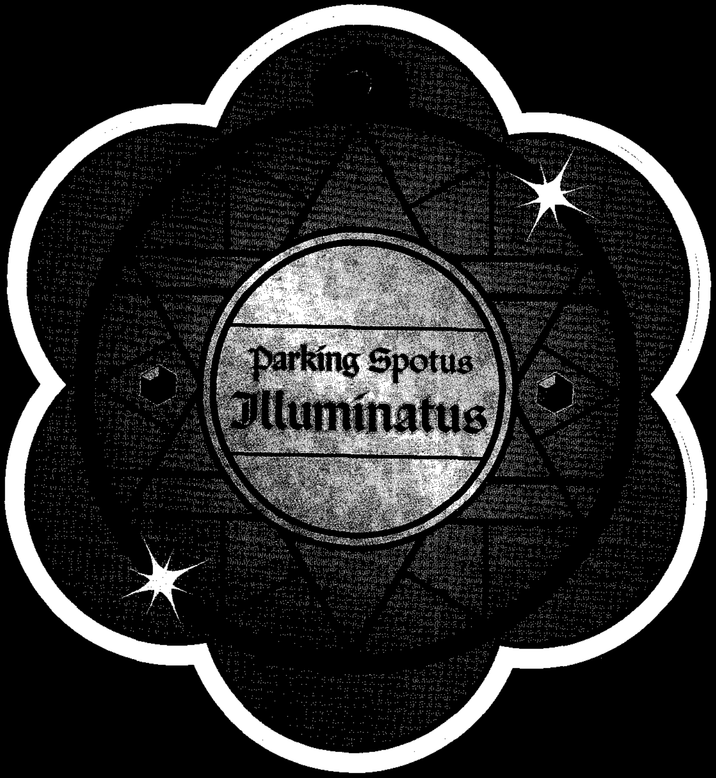
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6934)—Dec. 12: The mesmerizing composer and guitarist **Eyal Maoz** and his band **Edom** play Middle Eastern-inflected avant rock, with the Hammond-B3 player Brian Marsella, the bassist Shanir Blumenkranz, and the drummer Yuval Lion.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—Through Jan. 13: The vocalist **Andrea Marcovicci** invokes the spirit of Hildegarde, the larger-than-life, if now little-remembered, queen of American night life.

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—Dec. 6-9: **Tierney Sutton,** a vocalist who has an engaging way with familiar standards, previews material from her forthcoming album, "On the Other Side," which is due out in February.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Dec. 5-10: The Brazilian vocalist **Gal Costa.**

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—Dec. 5-10: The **Igor Butman** quartet. The St. Petersburg native has Bill Clinton's seal of approval: the ex-President has reportedly said that Butman "may be the greatest living jazz saxophone player, who happens to be a Russian." Here he has support from the pianist **Andrey Kondakov,** the bassist **Eddie Gomez,** and the drummer **Lenny White.**

FEINSTEIN'S AT THE REGENCY
540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—Through Dec. 31: The pianist and vocalist **Michael Feinstein** returns with his annual holiday show, a merry evening with an ecumenical and inclusive focus.

"HIGHLIGHTS IN JAZZ"
Dec. 7: The clarinettist **Buddy DeFranco,** the guitarist **Howard Alden,** the pianist **Derek Smith,** and the trumpeter **Randy Sandke** are a heady mix of veterans with swing on their minds. (Tribeca Performing Arts Center, 199 Chambers St. 212-220-1460.)

MERKIN CONCERT HALL
129 W. 67th St. (212-501-3330)—Dec. 9: The arranger **Bob Belden** gives Miles Davis's epochal 1969 fusion extravaganza, "Bitches Brew," a sonic overhaul. Belden's Animation ensemble, which includes the trumpeter **Tim Hagans,** the keyboardist **Scott Kinsey,** the bassists **Bill Laswell** and **Matt Garrison,** the drummers **Billy Kilson** and **Guy Licata,** and the turntablist **DJ Logic,** will be joined by **Teo Macero,** Davis's legendary hands-on producer. Dec. 11: The effusive vibraphonist and marimba player **Steve Nelson** performs duets with the mainstream pianist **Mulgrew Miller,** and with the dazzling bassist **Dave Holland,** who happens to be his regular boss.

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—Dec. 8: **Lewis Nash,** a frequent presence as sideman for leaders who crave bebop drumming in its most polished state, takes charge of his own small group.

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Dec. 5-10: The master drummer **Paul Motian** is constantly fiddling with his bands, much to our benefit. **Trio 2000 + Two** brings together some familiar associates (the saxophonist **Chris Potter** and the bassist **Larry Grenadier**), an occasional colleague (the pianist **Masabumi Kikuchi**), and a performer who's new to Motian's circle (the acclaimed saxophonist **Greg Osby**). The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

TABLES FOR TWO
MAX BRENNER

841 Broadway, between 13th and 14th Sts. (212-388-0030)—Strictly speaking, Max Brenner, "the bald man," doesn't exist. He's a creation of two Israeli marketers, Max Fichtman and Oded Brenner, who opened a chocolate shop in Raanana ten years ago. Still, Oded Brenner, who is, in fact, bald, has assumed the role (Fichtman is no longer involved), and, in pursuit of global choco-domination, he has issued a slew of grandiose pronouncements about his "chocolate love story" and his mission to create "a new chocolate culture." Did the founders of Friendly's make such claims for their ice cream?

The Union Square franchise, which has been open for six months (a new outlet opened last week in the East Village), would seem to be a chocoholic's dream, cluttered with vats of molten chocolate, clear apothecary flasks of what appear to be cocoa powders and spices, and brown pipes overhead, which, despite signs indicating otherwise, are almost certainly not full of the stuff. A menu full of glistening photographs offers chocolate in many guises. (There is also regular food—oily *croques-madames*, hulking crêpes, omelettes as big as handbags—that should be summoned from the kitchen only if you have meal guilt to assuage or kids to nourish.) There are half a dozen hot-cocoa varieties, a chocolate fondue, a giant syringe full of chocolate, and a sliced bagel with a chocolate bar and praline sandwiched in between. The "individual mess," a heap of chocolate chunks, cake, and sauce, with ice cream, whipped cream, toffee cream, sprinkles, et al., comes in a bowl big enough for a Great Dane and may cause even the most sweet-toothed or stoned diner to pine for a daintier portion, or a potato chip. On a recent visit, a usually undiscerning choco-fiend tried the melted milk chocolate into which one dips vanilla ice-cream bars. "It tastes like melted Easter bunnies," she said, frowning. A bite of chocolate pizza—milk and white chocolate and marshmallow on a pizza crust—inspired a grimace from another diner. As he declared that purgation was imminent, a waitress came by. "Would you like a Coke?" she said, holding out an unsolicited tankard. No thanks. Really. (Open daily for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Desserts $4.75-$13.75.)

—*Nick Paumgarten*

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Louis Comfort Tiffany and Laurelton Hall: An Artist's Country Estate."** An eighty-four-room Art Nouveau fantasia, Louis Comfort Tiffany's Laurelton Hall was built in 1905 on Long Island Sound. Before it burned down, in 1957, its treasures were parcelled out to various collections; regathered here, they establish an atmosphere of swooning luxury. Aestheticism effloresces in paintings, watercolors, Favrile vases, stained-glass windows, enamels, lamps, and even the complete "Daffodil Terrace," an elaborate pergola with glass-bouquet capitals topping

From the enchanting actress and writer on Indian food

MADHUR JAFFREY

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A memoir of her girlhood in Delhi

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"★★★★ The sort of account that triggers a longing for a life one never lived" –*People*

"Readers will lap up this mouthwatering memoir." –*Kirkus Reviews*

"In a sophisticated and secular way, she celebrates the sacred and healing potential of food in India." –*Financial Times*

"A vivid account of a golden childhood... powerful stuff...Scrap the history...this is her story: intelligent, funny, forgiving, subversive" –*Daily Mail*

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Photographs by Jeff Jacobson (including "New York City," above) are on view at Peer.

marble columns. Interspersed are items from Tiffany's myriad collections, including Chinese porcelains, Japanese sword guards, called tsuba (he owned two thousand of these alone), Turkish tiles, Indian teaks, and Northwest Coast Native American basketry and beadwork. Through May 20. ♦ **"Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s"** features work by ten Weimar-era artists, including Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Ludwig Meidner. Through Feb. 19. ♦ **"New Orleans After the Flood: Photographs by Robert Polidori."** Through Dec. 10. ♦ **"Americans in Paris, 1860-1900."** Through Jan. 28. ♦ **"Cézanne to Picasso: Ambroise Vollard, Patron of the Avant-Garde."** Through Jan. 7. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"New Photography 2006."** Suspended during the museum's reconstruction, MOMA's annual showcase of contemporary photography was revived last year to appropriately little fanfare, and this year's three-person edition is even more disappointing. Jonathan Monk and Barbara Probst toy with simple-minded conceptual strategies that never translate into interesting images, which leaves Jules Spinatsch to carry the ball for intelligent, engaged work. The Swiss artist's "Temporary Discomfort" project examines the security apparatus surrounding economic summit meetings, including boarded-up and locked-down areas that suggest urban ghost towns. His tour de force—a mural-size piece made up of thousands of small images—is a patchwork panorama that surveils the surveillance at Davos to splendid, if ultimately disorienting, effect. Through Jan. 8. ♦ **"Manet and the Execution of Maximilian."** Through Jan. 29. ♦ **"Brice Marden: A Retrospective of Paintings and Drawings."** Through Jan. 15. ♦ **"Eye on Europe: Prints, Books, and Multiples, 1960 to Now."** Through Jan. 1. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—The wide-ranging survey **"Spanish Painting from El Greco to Picasso: Time, Truth, and Memory"** (a small Goya, depicting a trio of nude figures, gives the show its title) is organized into centuries-spanning chapters like "The Domestic World" and "Weeping Women," pointing up thematic commonalities that might have been obscured in a chronological display. Whether this is a good thing is debatable: does this provide a new window onto a tradition of painting, or does it just retell stories we've already heard about Spanish culture? One walks from a group of portraits of monks to still-lifes featuring freshly killed game to scenes of bullfights, and it's as if a fatalist Catholicism has bled over into culinary and sporting realms; a memento-mori skull (and there are many here) doesn't look so different from a butchered sheep's head, and their meanings don't seem so far apart. The roster of artists is impressive, and there's an airy feeling to the installation. The Zurbaráns and Murillos, Velázquezes and Cotáns have plenty of room to stretch and preen, and the conversation among them can be wonderful. Through March 28. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Madison Ave. at 75th St. (800-944-8639)—**"Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980-2005."** Through Feb. 11. ♦ All roads in modernism lead back to Josef Albers and László Moholy-Nagy in **"Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From the Bauhaus to the New World."** Through Jan. 21. ♦ **"Picasso and American Art."** Through Jan. 28. ♦ Works by Edward Hopper fill the fifth floor, including "Nighthawks," on loan from the Art Institute of Chicago. Through Dec. 31. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART

200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Annie Leibovitz: A Photographer's Life, 1990-2005."** Through Jan. 21. ♦ **"Tigers of Wrath: Watercolors by Walton Ford."** Through Jan. 28. ♦ **"Ron Mueck."** Through Feb. 4. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and weekends, 11 to 6.)

FRICK COLLECTION

1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—**"Cimabue and Early Italian Devotional Painting."** Through Dec. 31. ♦ **"Domenico Tiepolo (1727-1804): A New Testament."** Through Jan. 7. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

JAPAN SOCIETY

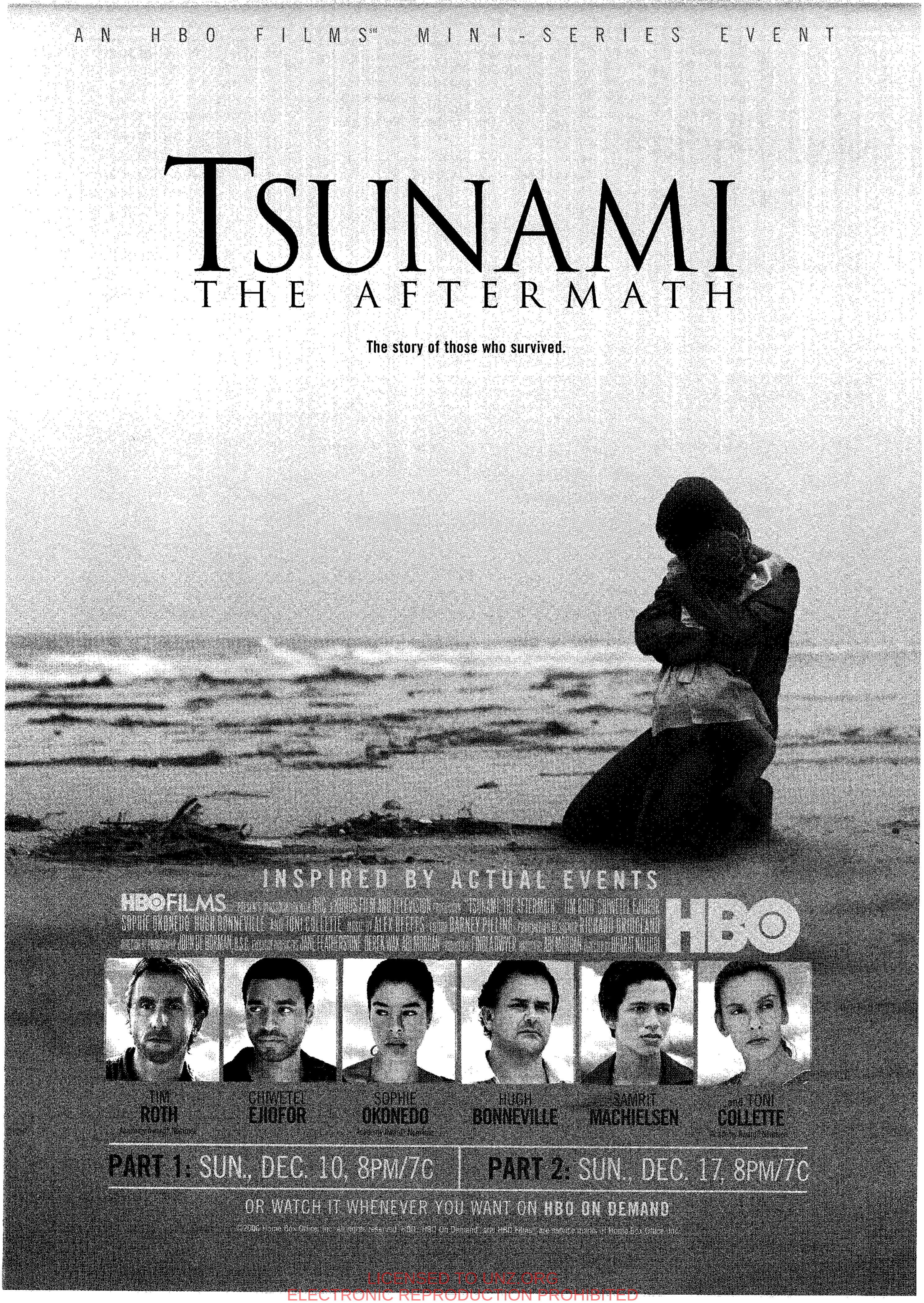
333 E. 47th St. (212-752-3015)—The artist-potter is a significant figure in Japanese aesthetic culture, from the traditional ceramicists of Kyoto to younger practitioners who've bent the medium into unrecognizable forms. This versatility is evident in **"Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century,"** in works that mimic wood, marble, paper, fabric, shells, coral, and geological formations. Biomorphic impulses are countered by architectural ones, the utilitarian vessel by the decorative column or orb. An expressionist, wood-fired work is juxtaposed with one glazed and painted to make a trompe-l'oeil cardboard box. If there's an overarching discourse here, it is about clay's fundamental relationship to fire and the differing responses it engenders from potters. Some aim toward mastery of the primordial element and precision in form; others relish accident and chance. Through Jan. 21. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 11 to 6, Fridays, 11 to 9, and weekends, 11 to 5.)

NEUE GALERIE

1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200)—**"Josef Hoffmann: Interiors, 1902-1913."** Through Feb. 26. (Open Thursdays, and Saturdays through Mondays, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 11 to 9.)

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER

22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City (718-784-2084)—**"Defamation of Character"** proceeds from the premise that "insult is the voice of Oedipal progress." Not surprisingly, it's a drama starring angry white boys, among them Chris Burden, Richard Prince, the Chapman brothers, Sean Landers, and Matthew Barney. Their iconoclasm is funny and timely; still, a more interesting show could have foregrounded the other children breaking the Law of the Father. Glenn Ligon, for example, contributes a giant neon "AMERICA" sign that fails to light up. Sue Williams's gleefully nasty 1992 painting celebrates "ninity" (as in ninny-femininity), and in the triumphantly weird video by Harry Dodge and Stanya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THIS WEEK:

Audio: Sasha Frere-Jones on Beatles mashups.

Slide Show: The Somalis of Lewiston, Maine.

"I Cover Carter" and other pieces by George W. S. Trow (1943-2006).

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Kahn, a blowsy blonde weed-whacks a California hill, in a Sisyphean parable of ennui-cum-rage. Through Jan. 8. ♦ **"Katrín Sigurdardóttir: High Plane V."** Through May 7. ♦ **"John Latham: Time Base and the Universe"** surveys fifty years of painting, sculpture, and film by the British artist (1921-2006). Through Jan. 8. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, noon to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Galleries are usually open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6; please call the gallery for exact hours.

STÉPHANE COUTURIER
This Paris-based photographer is best known for large-scale color images of construction sites that turned cross-sections of half-built skyscrapers into multilayered grids. For Couturier's spectacular new series, he pushes his work further into abstraction by digitally sandwiching photos of a Toyota assembly line and allowing them to bleed through one another. The riotous simultaneity that results is a celebration of industry at its most vibrant and impersonal. Human presence is fleeting here, and even car chassis can appear ghostly in these high-tech mashups of machinery in motion. As usual, Couturier's colors—lipstick pink, neon orange, acid green—are as exciting as his compositions. Through Jan. 6. (Laurence Miller, 20 W. 57th St. 212-397-3930.)

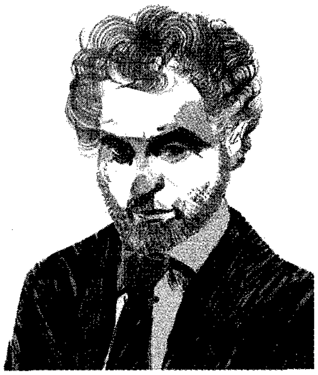
CHARLES JONES
Jones (1866-1959) was an English gardener who made unpretentiously beautiful still-life photographs of the fruits, vegetables, and flowers he raised. He died virtually unknown, but when a trunk full of his gold-toned black-and-white photographs turned up in a London antiques market in 1981, his rediscovery made waves. Here, Jones's botanical studies are shown alongside those of modernist masters like Blossfeldt, Weston, and Steichen, all of whom he predated, and his elegant simplicity stands out. A bound stalk of celery, leaning against what appears to be a raw-linen backdrop, is at once understated and astonishingly refined. A vine full of ripe tomatoes is as seductive as a recumbent nude. Through Jan. 6. (Greenberg, 41 E. 57th St. 212-334-0010.)

ROBERT MORRIS
Those familiar with Morris's high-minimalist sculptures may be surprised by his recent encaustic-on-board paintings, brooding interiors that evince a mix of Hopper and de Chirico, plus something unaccountably suggestive of the bedroom in "Goodnight Moon." Wistful art-historical references (Courbet's naughty "L'Origine du Monde," George Bellows's laboring boxers) are inserted into these sombre, hallucinatory rooms, along with quotes from Morris family photographs. The result is like a dark dream book, disconcertingly ingenuous yet grim. A suite of graphite-on-paper drawings extends the mood. Through Dec. 22. (Castelli, 18 E. 77th St. 212-249-4470.)

Short List

JOHN CURRIN: Gagosian, 980 Madison Ave., at 76th St. 212-744-2313. Through Dec. 22. **GREGORY CREWDSON:** Skarstedt, 1018 Madison Ave, at 78th St. 212-737-2060. Through Dec. 9. **RICHARD ESTES:** Susan Sheehan, 20 W. 57th St. 212-489-3331. Through Dec. 9. **MARILYN MINTER:** Salon 94, 12 E. 94th St. 646-672-9212. Through Jan. 20. **ROBERT POLIDORI:** Houk, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-750-7070. Through Dec. 23. **SIGMAR POLKE:** Michael Werner, 4 E. 77th St. 212-988-1623. Through Jan. 13. **ALBERT RENGER-PATZSCH:** Zabriskie, 41 E. 57th St. 212-752-1223. Through Dec. 9. **FRANZ ROH:** Ubu, 416 E. 59th St. 212-753-4444. Through Dec. 22. **SAUL STEINBERG:** Baumgold, 74 E. 79th St. 212-861-7338. Through Feb. 10. **CHARLES H. TRAUB:** Gitterman, 170 E. 75th St. 212-734-0868. Through Dec. 13. **ANDREW WYETH:** Adelson, 19 E. 82nd St. 212-439-6800. Through Dec. 22.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
RAGS TO RICHES



Martin Bresnick is one of the great pragmatists in contemporary music, a composer who will use any sound as long as it speaks vividly and makes narrative sense. He is also a great teacher of composition, able to guide students who are moving in directions different from his own. Over many years at Yale, he has taught the members of the pop-inflected Bang on a Can collective—Michael Gordon, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe—and a hundred or more others of all persuasions. Bresnick just turned sixty, and a mini-festival is in progress. The Cantaloupe label, Bang on a Can's boutique operation, has released "The Essential Martin Bresnick"; Yale musicians are presenting an all-Bresnick concert at Zankel Hall on Saturday night; and two pieces from "Opere della Musica Povera" ("Works of a Poor Music"), his dazzlingly varied evening-length cycle of vocal and instrumental works, will appear on a Bang on a Can All-Stars program at Zankel on Tuesday. The last title has an ironic ring: Bresnick creates a rich world in even the humblest forms.

—*Alex Ross*

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

JANET BIGGS
A quote from "Blade Runner" provides the title for this show: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe . . . All those moments will be lost in time like tears in rain." It's a pretty thought, but its connection to Biggs's new videos isn't fully established. Similarly, her juxtaposition of images, while lovely, doesn't always cohere. Cadets at the Citadel perform an intricately choreographed march; a blind equestrian champion puts her horse through its paces; polar bears swim an underwater circuit in Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo; and football players crawl through a network of tires, under the image of a nearly motionless falcon. In this setting, discipline, training, and instinct seem like stronger parallels than time or loss. Through Dec. 16. (Oliver, 513 W. 26th St. 212-929-5949.)

MATTHEW BUCKINGHAM / ALEJANDRO CESARCO / LOUISE LAWLER / ALLEN RUPPERSBERG
Conceptualism shows a fun and user-friendly face in this exhibition of four artists who share an ethos, if not an aesthetic. Cesarco's "Scrabble" video, in which he spells out the name of artistic and intellectual influences (Gursky, Adorno, Ruscha) is complemented by Lawler's nutty "Birdcalls," in which she screeches out the names of famous artists (Ruscha again, as well as others of the male-art-star species). Ruppersberg's and Buckingham's meditations on the Second World War and East Berlin are momentarily darker, but levity is restored with Ruppersberg's puzzle printed with an image of his former New York studio, and with Buckingham's videotaped attempt to interview birds in Battery Park. Through Dec. 16. (Murray Guy, 453 W. 17th St. 212-463-7372.)

MAUREEN GALLACE
Gallace is known for her diminutive paintings of houses with pitched roofs set in paint-by-numbers landscapes. Here she's branched out—wildly, for her—with paintings of a black cat, a rainbow, and a boy playing guitar. All of these, however, retain her characteristic washed-out, anesthetized sensibility. And, like much of her work, they're perplexing not for any aesthetic, theoretical, or conceptual curveballs but for their aggressive blandness. The irony is that, in an art world full of grand gestures and dramatic entrances, Gallace stands out merely by making paintings in pocket-size proportions that seem to shrink into themselves and look as if they were striving to say next to nothing. Through Dec. 22. (303 Gallery, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-255-1121.)

JOANNE GREENBAUM
Four big new paintings extend Greenbaum's interest in a loopy, frenetic version of architectonic abstraction. Day-Glo colors and a shape vocabulary of blocks, steps, cross-outs, and spirals make the paintings feel inhabited by the spirit of a big-box Staples store—their hot, doodly energy suggests too much time spent under the hum of fluorescent bulbs. The spirit of Ab Ex is also alive and well in Greenbaum's world, though, and her mental cubicle enlarges and replicates according to a ludic, not an efficient, logic. Through Dec. 23. (D'Amelio Terras, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-352-9460.)

DAVID MAISEL
The color photographs in Maisel's recent exhibitions were aerial views of an alien American landscape: industrial and agricultural sites rendered nearly unrecognizable by toxic waste and other environmental damage. His fine new work is on more familiar territory—the city of Los Angeles—but it still looks like another, much more forbidding planet. That's partly the result of Maisel's decision to print these black-and-white aerial pictures in negative, so skyscraper shadows read as erasures and trees as moldy excrescences on the grid. This is not the first time you've seen an overhead shot of L.A.'s looping freeway interchanges, but Maisel abstracts them and everything else here until the city appears depopulated, absolutely postapocalyptic. Through Dec. 23. (Von Lintel, 555 W. 25th St. 212-242-0599.)

RICCARDO VECCHIO

Short List

JASON BROOKS: Holm, 524 W. 24th St. 212-627-7444. Through Dec. 22. **TIM EITEL:** PaceWildenstein, 534 W. 25th St. 212-929-7000. Through Jan. 20. **DAN FLAVIN:** Cooper, 534 W. 21st St. 212-255-1105. Through Dec. 22. **JEFF JACOBSON:** Peer, 526 W. 26th St. 212-741-6599. Through Jan. 6. **CHRISTIAN JANKOWSKI:** The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. Through Dec. 9. **ELLSWORTH KELLY:** 523 W. 24th St., 522 W. 22nd St., and 526 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200. Through Jan. 27. **PAUL LEE:** Audiello, 526 W. 26th St. 212-675-9082. Through Dec. 16. **ROBERT LONGO:** Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St. 212-206-7100. Through Dec. 9. **CINDY SHERMAN:** Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St. 212-206-7100. Through Dec. 16. **HIROSHI SUGIMOTO:** Sonnabend, 536 W. 22nd St. 212-627-1018. Through Dec. 9. **ANDY WARHOL:** Gagosian, 555 W. 24th St. and 522 W. 21st St. 212-741-1111. Through Dec. 22. **RICCARDO VECCHIO:** School of Visual Arts, 601 W. 26th St. 212-592-2145. Through Dec. 16. **CATHERINE YASS:** Lelong, 528 W. 26th St. 212-315-0470. Through Dec. 9.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

JONATHAN BOROFSKY
Borofsky's first gallery show in fourteen years is grand and banal. Colossal assemblies of modular, abstracted human figures, in galvanized steel or tinted plastic, deliver dewy humanism on a daunting scale. This from an artist who, in the late seventies and early eighties, unified fading Conceptualism and nascent neo-expressionism in the persona of a compulsive, dream-racked man-child. Once marked by torrents of eccentric ideas and inventive forms, Borofsky's art has both narrowed and ballooned, in thrall to a sentimental, one-note megalomania. There may be a certain weird charm in the notion of paper dolls the size of buildings, but the reality palls on arrival. Through Dec. 23. (Deitch, 18 Wooster St. 212-343-7300.)

SLATER BRADLEY
Balladic videos by the medium's vertiginously hip Peter Pan cast him or his collaborator, Benjamin Brock, as Michael Jackson being pathetically boyish in the snow; an old-school British dandy channelling Gene Kelly in "Singin' in the Rain" (soaked by a digitally animated little cloud) on Roosevelt Island; a "2001" astronaut prowling the deserted Museum of Natural History; and one among many "Star Wars" Stormtroopers marching and milling at a desultory fan convention. Stylistic virtuosity (wittily referential cinematography, sonorously layered sound) and tasty allusion (Oscar Wilde here, F. W. Murnau there) subtilize without imperilling a determination not even to think about growing up. Through Dec. 23. (Team, 83 Grand St. 212-279-9219.)

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET
In Balanchine's classic version of "The Nutcracker," the valiant Nutcracker slays the evil mouse king, and the snowflake maidens waltz in the wintry forest. Casts are available on the company's Web site a week in advance. (New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center. 212-870-5570. Dec. 5-7 and Dec. 12 at 6, Dec. 8 at 8, Dec. 9 at 2 and 8, and Dec. 10 at 1 and 5. Through Dec. 30.)

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE
The second week of the City Center season sees a première by the former Ailey dancer Uri Sands, who has been winning praise in Minneapolis but hasn't shown much in New York yet. His "Existence Without Form" is an impressionistic piece in which the dancers are bandied about as if by unseen air currents. The week also features a new production of Ailey's "The River," a cycles-of-life collaboration with Duke Ellington from 1970. (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Dec. 5 and Dec. 12 at 7, Dec. 6-8 at 8, Dec. 9 at 2 and 8, and Dec. 10 at 3 and 7:30. Through Dec. 31.)

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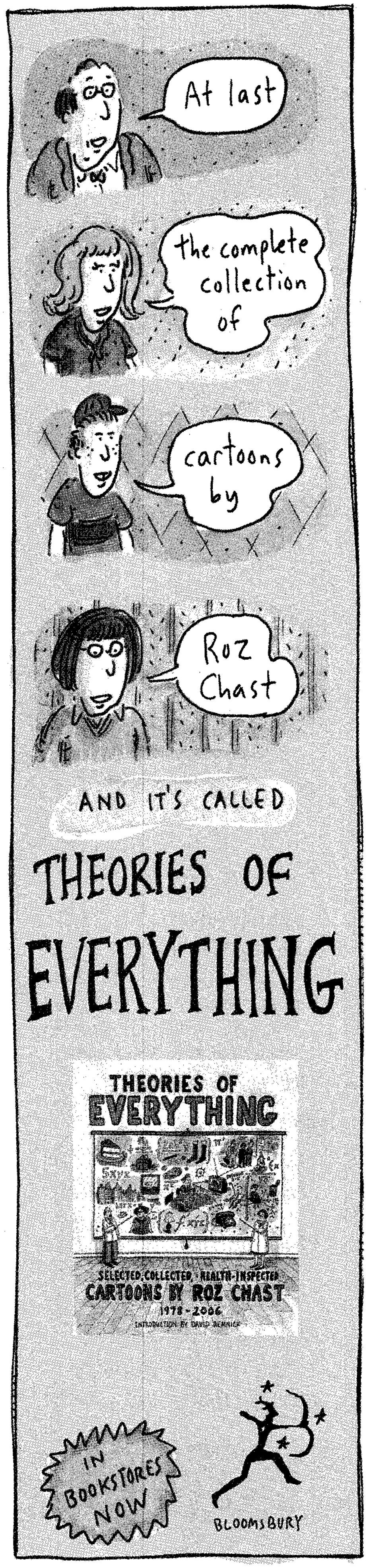

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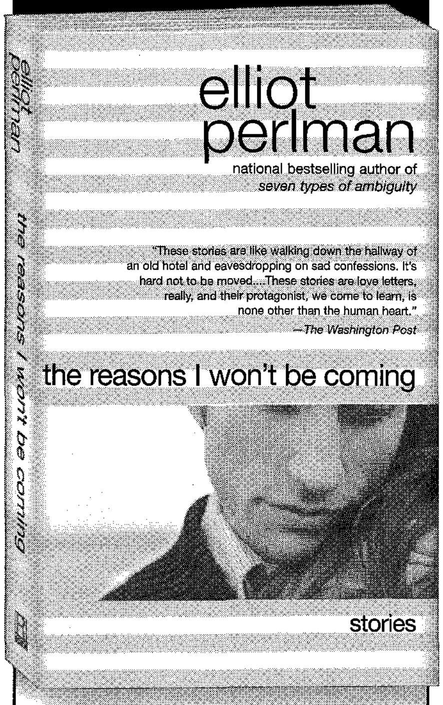
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PARSONS DANCE
The crowd-pleasing choreographer brings his dynamic company to the Joyce for a two-week season that includes a big helping of past hits ("Caught," "The Envelope," "Hand Dance") and three New York premières. In "Nascimento Novo," the company grooves to music by the Brazilian pop icon Milton Nascimento, while "Peel" has an original classical score by Michael Gordon. On alternating nights, Abby Silva and Malvina Sardou perform the new solo "One Long Move." (175 Eighth Ave. 212-242-0800. Dec. 5-6 at 7:30, Dec. 7-8 at 8, Dec. 9 at 2 and 8, and Dec. 10 at 2 and 7:30. Through Dec. 17.)

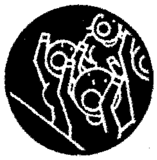
BILL T. JONES/ARNIE ZANE DANCE COMPANY
"Chapel/Chapter" takes Harlem Stage's Gatehouse, the pump station recently transformed into a theatre, and transforms it again, treating the stage both as the floor of a church and as a hopscotch grid. As two actors dispassionately recite the deposition of a man who has murdered a family of four, the crime is reënacted in stylized form. Then it's repeated, with the deposition sung as plainsong chant. The formal manipulations aren't academic: they distill the underlying emotions while avoiding melodrama. Only the family dog howls. (150 Convent Ave., at W. 135th St. 212-650-7100. Dec. 5-8 at 7:30 and Dec. 9 at 3 and 7:30.)

NEW YORK THEATRE BALLET
This admirable chamber company presents its simplified, hour-long "Nutcracker," designed for the enjoyment of children. (Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. 212-307-4100. Dec. 8 at 10 A.M. and Dec. 9-10 at 11 A.M., 1, and 3:30. Through Dec. 17.)

"YORKVILLE NUTCRACKER"
Frances Patrelle's charming take on the classic ballet, set in 1895, at Gracie Mansion. On Saturday evening and Sunday, the lovely Jenifer Ringer, on loan from the New York City Ballet, will perform the part of the Sugar Plum Fairy. (Kaye Playhouse, Park Ave. at 68th St. 212-772-4448. Dec. 8 at 11 A.M. and 6, Dec. 9 at 2 and 7, and Dec. 10 at noon and 5.)

TANZTHEATER WUPPERTAL PINA BAUSCH
"Nefés" (Turkish for "breath") is the German dance-theatre queen's tribute to Istanbul. The latest in a long line of city-inspired works, the three-hour spectacle is also the latest example of the choreographer's recent turn from the psychopathological focus of her early career toward a calmer, more whimsical tone. Large-scale scenic effects are still at work—her favorite element, water, gathers in a pool like the Bosphorus and lathers up in the soap bubbles of a Turkish bath—but the primary medium is now dance. Intimate, sensual pleasure in movement floods the piece like the return of the repressed. (BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Ave. 718-636-4100. Dec. 8-9 at 7:30, Dec. 10 at 3, and Dec. 12 at 7. Through Dec. 16.)

POP NOTES
AND IN THE END



The Beatles, a pop combo from England, have a new album. Or they don't, depending on how you see it. They had a not-new album called "1" a few years ago, which became one of the biggest-selling albums of all time. Lesson: even though every man, woman, and parakeet already owns many Beatles albums, they will buy these songs again, even if there is not a lick of newness involved. With **"Love"** (Capitol), there is a lick. The producer Sir George Martin, working with his son, Giles, has revisited the original Beatles recordings to provide a soundtrack for the Cirque du Soleil act "Love." The Martins have created an eighty-minute Beatles mix tape using the well-known recordings, demo versions, and bits that were buried the first time around. (One significant benefit of "Love" is that the Martins worked from original multitrack tapes, and the songs get their best digital sound to date.) In several instances, they have blended elements of two or three Beatles songs to make a new composition.

It is impossible to ruin this music—one would have to submerge "Come Together" under an ocean of tubas to subdue its cryptic badassery. But an ineptly sequenced mix tape can lessen the greatness of great songs, and "Love" manages to do this several times. The segues from "I Am the Walrus" into "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" into "Help!" may be supported by acrobatic stagecraft, but without bodysuits and backflips, these transitions are infelicitous. "Love" is not entirely redundant; the subtle tweaking of familiar songs is consistently smart and can sometimes be thrilling. So why not have less of what we all know and more reinvention? Bedroom mashup producers like Danger Mouse and Go Home Productions have been rearranging Beatles records for the past five years, and, when the Martins allow themselves to be equally irreverent, "Love" justifies its existence. In one track, the drum pattern from "Tomorrow Never Knows" (Ringo's finest moment) is threaded into George Harrison's "Within You Without You" to create a radically remixed song, emphasizing the strings and voice while blending in reversed tapes. It is gorgeous and odd, kind of like something the Beatles would do.

—*Sasha Frere-Jones*

"DANCE WITHOUT BODIES"
For her newest work, at the Kitchen, the Korean-Japanese choreographer Koosil-ja has developed a system for, as she puts it, creating "dance memories that we can look at." These "memories" come in the form of three video projections—a sequence of short film clips, two dancers improvising, and selections of animated human movement. From these, the dancers (Koosil-ja and Melissa Guerrero) reproduce select movements with their own bodies—the arms copying one source, the legs another, and the head yet another. (512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. Dec. 6-9 at 8.)

PALISSIMO
Images of partings—from small farewells to shocking deaths—litter the phantasmagoric landscape of the Slovak-born choreographer Pavel Zustiak's "Le Petit Mort / Now It's Time to Say Goodbye." As some of the performers dance in front of a video screen, others linger in the exposed wings, bandaging themselves. Risky leaps, collapsing bodies, and truncated scenes mimic the abruptness of the death blow, while sensual movements and segments of Tal Yarden's multilayered video montage explore that other little death. (P.S. 122, at 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101. Dec. 7-8 at 8, Dec. 9 at 5 and 8, and Dec. 10 at 5.)

MOVEMENT RESEARCH FESTIVAL
The annual festival, at Danspace Project, celebrates its ongoing commitment to experimentation and improvisation with three evenings of performances by local and imported choreographers, including Yvonne Meier, Daniel Lepkoff, Chris Aiken, and the Australian duo of David Corbet and Jacob Lehrer. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-8194. Dec. 8-10 at 8:30.)

SOKOLOW THEATRE DANCE ENSEMBLE
The 92nd Street Y starts a series of performances focussing on the great twentieth-century choreographers associated with the institution by looking at Anna Sokolow. "Ballad in a Popular Style," "Bullfight," and "Kaddish," three powerful female solos from the thirties and forties that Sokolow reworked in the seventies and eighties (her career was long) set a high bar for the remainder of the bill: "Four Songs," from 1995; a new solo by the company's artistic director, Jim May; and a still inchoate work in progress by the Argentinean choreographer Anabella Lenzu that uses tango steps, white handkerchiefs, and anguished gesture to convey a society in collapse. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Dec. 10 at 3.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
Kobie van Rensburg, who earned the respect of Met audiences through his authoritative performances in Handel's "Rodelinda," takes the leading role in Mozart's **"Idomeneo,"** lately filled by Ben Heppner. The rest of the gilt-edged roster includes Dorothea Röschmann, Alexandra Deshorties, and Magdalena Kožená; expect a rich and propulsive reading from James Levine and the orchestra. (Dec. 6 at 8 and Dec. 9 at 1. These are the final performances.) ♦ Verdi's magnificent **"Don Carlo,"** with Patricia Racette, Olga Borodina, Johan Botha, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, René Pape, and Samuel Ramey; Levine conducts. (Dec. 7 and Dec. 11 at 7.) ♦ The much-anticipated début of Joseph Calleja as the Duke in **"Rigoletto"** revealed a still-growing singer who possesses a lyric tenor of ravishing beauty; his love interest, Gilda, is sung by the soprano Ekaterina Siurina, another recent débutante, whose technical perfection more than makes up for her sometimes timid expressivity. Nancy Fabiola Herrera, Carlos Alvarez, and Robert Lloyd (in the roles of Maddalena, Rigoletto, and Sparafucile, respectively) all know their way around Verdi's sturdiest warhorse; Friedrich Haider. (Dec. 8 and Dec. 12 at 8.) ♦ All that glitters is not Gelb, as the latest revival of **"La Bohème"** proves. Franco Zeffirelli's grandiose production—the epitome of Met values, circa 1981—hardly allows for intimacy, but it can't be reproached for want of voluptuous scenery, vivacity, or charm. The persuasive, if idiosyncratic, soprano Cristina Gallardo-Domâs takes her place as Mimì alongside her Rodolfo, the silk-toned Rolando Villazón; the always impressive bass John Relyea makes the most of the plum little part of Colline. Also with Anna Samuil and Peter Coleman-Wright; Plácido Domingo conducts, with admirable restraint. (Dec. 9 at 8:30.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
Things get busy at Avery Fisher Hall come holiday time. First there's a concert, conducted by Bramwell Tovey, that begins with two arresting American works combining classical and popular styles: Copland's self-explanatory "El Salón México" and Christopher Rouse's elegant but rock-infused Symphony No. 2. The second half is a collaborative concert with Wynton Marsalis's Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, in which each ensemble gets its turn at excerpts from "The Nutcracker"—in Tchaikovsky's originals, and in the classic jazz transformations by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn. (Dec. 6-7 at 7:30 and Dec. 8-9 at 8.) ♦ The Philharmonic's Principal Brass Quintet, along with the Canadian Brass, then have the stage to themselves, performing a program of festive holiday fare. (Dec. 10 at 3.) ♦ Success hasn't ruined Garrison Keillor. After a rollicking première with the Phil last season, the Minnesota humorist and sage humbly returns to

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offer "The Good Enough Holiday Show," with his longtime musical enabler, Philip Brunelle, on the podium. (Dec. 12 at 7:30.) (212-875-5656.)

AMSTERDAM BAROQUE ORCHESTRA
Dec. 7 at 8: The first of Carnegie Hall's holiday concerts arrives courtesy of Ton Koopman's renowned ensemble, which, along with the Amsterdam Baroque Choir, offers such favorite works as Corelli's "Christmas Concerto" and Bach's Magnificat. ♦ Dec. 12 at 7:30: The orchestra, with a quartet of vocal soloists, moves down to Zankel Hall to perform an intimate all-Bach program, featuring "A Musical Offering" and the Cantata No. 211 ("The Coffee Cantata"). (212-247-7800.)

MILLER THEATRE: ORCHESTRA OF THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT
George Steel's "Bach in Context" mini-series is a useful umbrella under which all sorts of musical connections can be made. In "The Heirs of Bach," the twenty-year-old ensemble, one of the old guard of the European period-performance movement, makes some fairly direct ones, performing works by Bach, his son J. C. Bach, and one of his great admirers, Mozart (the "Gran Partita" for winds). (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. Dec. 8 at 8.)

CHICAGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Pierre Boulez leads the commanding ensemble in the kind of big-boned repertory for which it is renowned. Dec. 8 at 8: Mahler's Seventh Symphony. ♦ Dec. 9 at 8: The maestro discusses and conducts Bartók's "The Miraculous Mandarin," a monument of symphonic brutalism. ♦ Dec. 10 at 2: The "Mandarin" rears his head once more in a concert that also features two more delicate compositions, Ravel's "Valses Nobles et Sentimentales" and Ligeti's magnificent Piano Concerto (with a dedicated interpreter, Pierre-Laurent Aimard). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.)

RECITALS

"MAKING MUSIC: SOFIA GUBAIDULINA"
Carnegie Hall offers a tribute to the renowned Tatar composer, a poet of darkness whose music permits the occasional shaft of light. A company of excellent young artists (including the cellists Efe Baltacigil and Clancy Newman) performs a concert that features the American premières of both "Mirage: The Dancing Sun" and "On the Edge of the Abyss" (for seven cellos and two waterphones). (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. Dec. 6 at 7:30.)

STEPHANIE BLYTHE
The American mezzo-soprano, who combines a rich and expressive vocalism with a winning personality, offers a sheaf of classic songs by Brahms, Duparc, and Falla with the estimable pianist Warren Jones, who offers some solo works by Brahms (including the Rhapsody in G Minor) on his own. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. Dec. 7 at 7:30.)

BARGEMUSIC
Dec. 7-8 at 7:30: The violinist Colin Jacobsen, whose clear and forceful style is underpinned by passionate commitment and an inquiring mind, performs a program of fantasies (or Phantasies) by Telemann, Schoenberg, Schubert, and C. P. E. Bach, with the pianist Marija Stroke. ♦ Dec. 9 at 7:30 and Dec. 10 at 4: Olga Vinokur is at the piano for a jaunty program that features Mozart's Quintet and Poulenc's Sextet for Piano and Winds. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

"STRING QUARTETS WITH ROBERT MANN"
A legend of American chamber music—one of the founding members of the Juilliard String Quartet—comes out of retirement to join three other stars (the violinist Geoff Nuttall, the violist Nicholas Mann, and the cellist Bonnie Hampton) to perform Bartók's Quartet No. 6, Mozart's Viola Quintet in G Minor (with Hsun-Yun Huang), and Mann's own "Two Movements for String Quartet." (Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. Dec. 9 at 8.)

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER
A two-week Baroque binge at the Society begins with a hearty program of vocal and instrumental works by Telemann, Handel, Bach (the "Coffee Cantata"), and Vivaldi (the "Goldfinch" Concerto); the musicians include the soprano Sari Gruber, the cellist Colin Carr, and the flutist Carol Wincenc. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788. Dec. 8 at 8 and Dec. 10 at 5.)

"THE ESSENTIAL MARTIN BRESNICK"
An impressive group of Yale musicians (including the pianist Lisa Moore and the Yale Cellos) takes over Zankel Hall to offer a lavish tribute to the longtime faculty composer, an open-minded—and openhearted—eclectic whose music and teaching have been a seminal influence on a new wave of downtown composers. (212-247-7800. Dec. 9 at 7:30.)

92ND STREET Y: "ART OF THE GUITAR"
One of the highlights of the Y's season is this ambitious five-concert series, which brings in leading soloists from the classical, folk, and jazz traditions. The latest features Manuel Barrueco, who joins the respected Cuarteto Latinoamericano in works for guitar and strings by Piazzolla, Guastavino, and the predictably provocative Michael Daugherty ("Bay of Pigs"). (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Dec. 9 at 8.)

ANGELIKA KIRCHSCHLAGER
Listening to this stately Austrian mezzo-soprano is akin to running one's fingers through a layer of soft, golden sand. Content, for the most part, in the traditional repertoire, she offers lieder by Schumann and Schubert in a concert at Alice Tully Hall, accompanied by Malcolm Martineau. (212-247-7800. Dec. 10 at 2.)

76% of Americans plan on a more active lifestyle during retirement.

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PIERRE-LAURENT AIMARD
Lucid textures, crisp rhythms, and big, bold sounds are the hallmarks of this French pianist, who combines études by such composers as Debussy, Ligeti, Chopin, and Scriabin in a concert entitled "Study of a Study." (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. Dec. 11 at 7:30.)

MARK O'CONNOR STRING QUARTET
Not since Frank Sinatra took up conducting have so many popular artists tried to break into the classical game. The latest is O'Connor, the superlative bluegrass fiddler, who sits in with three sharp young string players (Colin and Eric Jacobsen and Max Mandel) to perform his String Quartet No. 1 and some music from Dvořák's "American" string quintet. (Makor, 35 W. 67th St. Dec. 12 at 7. For tickets, visit www.92y.org.)

MOVIES OPENING

APOCALYPTO
Mel Gibson's fifteenth-century Mayan drama. In Yucatec. Opening Dec. 8. (In wide release.)

BERGMAN ISLAND
A documentary about the director's life on the island of Fårö, directed by Marie Nyreröd. In Swedish. Opening Dec. 6. (Film Forum.)

BLOOD DIAMOND
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 8. (In wide release.)

DAYS OF GLORY
A drama, directed by Rachid Bouchareb, about four North African men in the Free French army during the Second World War. In French and Arabic. Opening Dec. 6. (Angelika Film Center.)

FAMILY LAW
A drama from Argentina, directed by Daniel Burman, about a family man who is overshadowed by his domineering father. In Spanish. Opening Dec. 8. (IFC Center.)

THE HOLIDAY
A romantic comedy, directed by Nancy Meyers, about a woman from L.A. (Cameron Diaz) and a woman from England (Kate Winslet) who swap homes. Opening Dec. 8. (In wide release.)

INLAND EMPIRE
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening Dec. 6. (IFC Center.)

MY DAD IS 100 YEARS OLD
Guy Maddin's tribute to Roberto Rossellini, starring Isabella Rossellini, who wrote the script. Opening Dec. 6. (Film Forum.)

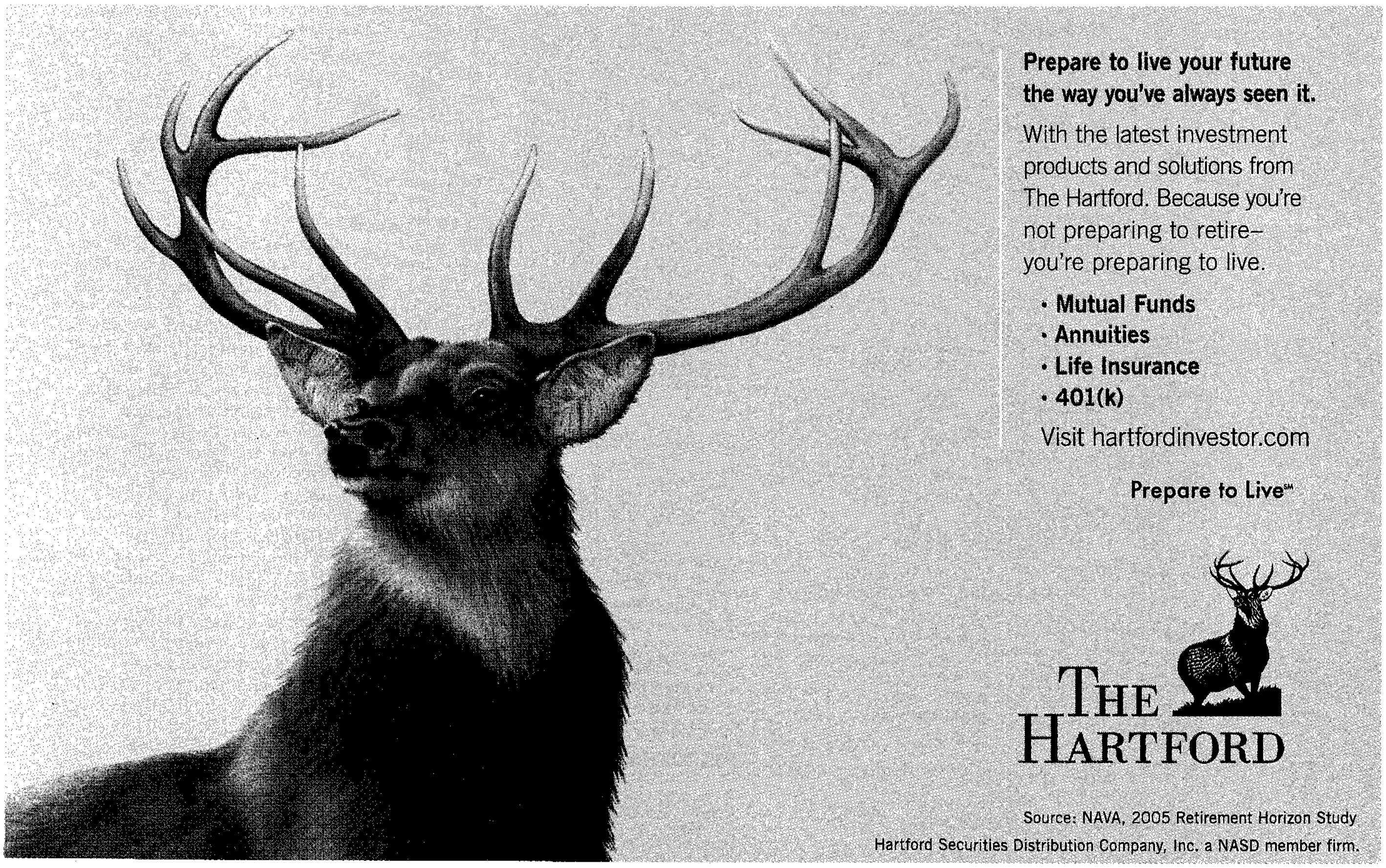
OFF THE BLACK
James Ponsoldt directed this drama about a teenage boy (Trevor Morgan) and his friendship with a middle-aged umpire (Nick Nolte). Opening Dec. 8. (Union Square.)

UNACCOMPANIED MINORS
A comedy, directed by Paul Feig, about children who bond at a snowed-in Chicago airport. Opening Dec. 8. (In wide release.)

NOW PLAYING

BABEL
Alejandro González Iñárritu creates savagely beautiful and heartbreaking images, he gets fearless performances out of his actors, he edits with the sharpest razor inside any computer in Hollywood, and he also abuses his audience with a humorless fatalism and a piling up of calamities that border on the ludicrous. "Babel" is set in Morocco, Tokyo, and both Southern California and northern Mexico. The movie has three stories—all touching on relationships between parents and children—which have been arbitrarily linked together by the will of the director and his collaborator, the screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga. Their theme is the pathos of ignorance. All over the world, terrible things are happening, and we cannot know them or feel them, but an eagle-eyed artist, as he spans the globe, can connect us. As a mood, this globalized empathy is a noble enterprise. As a method of constructing a movie, it's hopeless. With Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett as a couple that gets in trouble in Morocco, Adriana Barraza as their housekeeper and nanny back home with the kids in San Diego, and Rinko Kikuchi as a teen-age girl in Tokyo desperate for the embrace of a man. In French, English, Spanish, Japanese, Berber, and Arabic.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 10/30/06.) (In wide release.)

BOBBY
In Emilio Estevez's film, Senator Robert F. Kennedy is seen in newsreels and occasionally from the rear as a figure moving through the old Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles on the night of his assassination, June 4, 1968. Yet "Bobby" is devoted not to him but to such things as the marital difficulties of the hotel's hair stylist (Sharon Stone) and manager (William H. Macy), the soft meanderings of two retired gents in the lobby (Anthony Hopkins and Harry Belafonte), the psychedelic misadventures of a pair of truant campaign workers (Brian Geraghty and Shia LaBeouf), and many other little tales, starring Demi Moore, Estevez himself, Christian Slater, Heather Graham, Martin Sheen, Helen Hunt, Elijah Wood, and several others. The intersecting stories are meant to suggest the range of American character types, from base to noble, and also the conflicting feelings of vanity, fear, and idealism that Bobby Kennedy might have reconciled and harmonized in a Presidential campaign. But Estevez's script never rises above earnest banality. And



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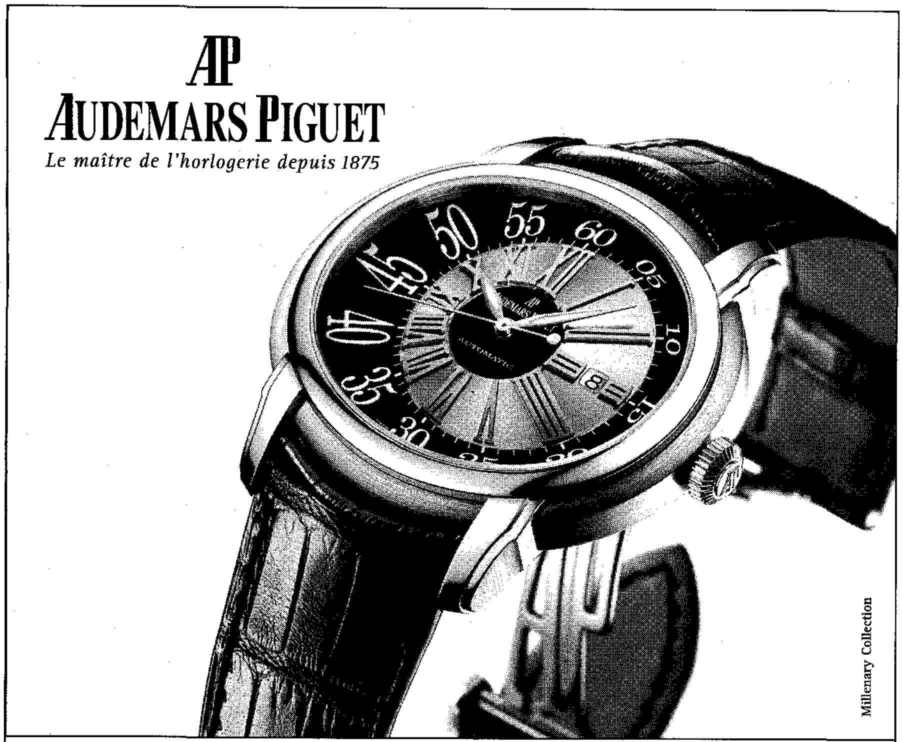

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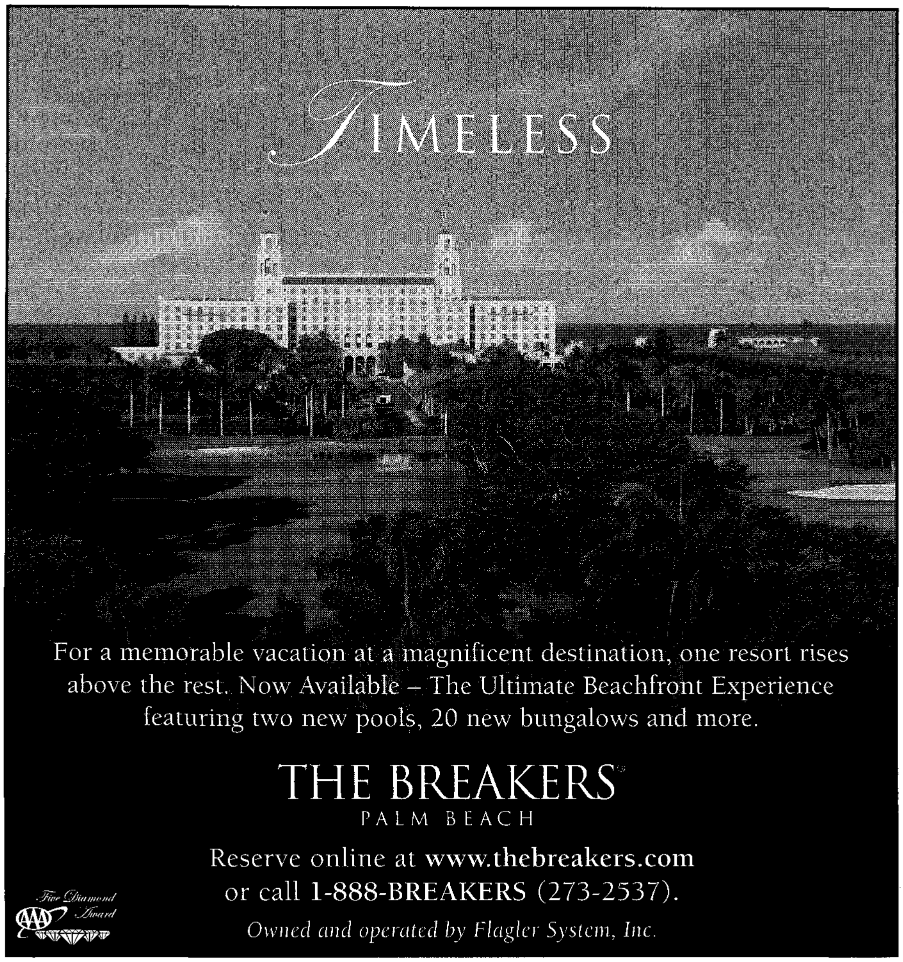

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didn't anyone suggest to him that you can't throw a movie-celebrity party about an assassination?—*D.D.* (11/27/06) (In wide release.)

BORAT

Somewhere inside the sound and fury that have shrouded this project is a short, gross, and very funny series of sketches, lightly knotted together into a modern picaresque. Sacha Baron Cohen, the British performer behind Ali G, brings his yet-more-notorious invention, the Kazakh journalist Borat Sagdiyev, to the United States, where his shameless curiosity, not to mention a reckless indifference to political correctness, is designed to cause maximum offense. The plot, if you can call it that, demands that Borat travel across the country to find Pamela Anderson: a noble quest, even if it does mean putting that distinguished actress in a sack. Some of the time, our hero is accompanied by his manager, Azamat (Ken Davitian), and also by a live bear, although Azamat looks more like a bear than the bear does. There are jokes thrown at Jews, African-Americans, rodeo fans, homosexuals, and, for good measure, the rest of the population. The smart explanation for this is that Baron Cohen, who is Jewish himself, is assaulting intolerance wherever he finds it; what he cannot control is the fate of the film itself, and one wonders whether, to a late-night college audience, say, the irony behind Borat would be of much concern. Could the movie become a safety valve, encouraging its fans to let off steam?—*Anthony Lane* (11/6/06) (In wide release.)

CASINO ROYALE

James Bond returns in a new incarnation. Much of the debate that preceded this twenty-first installment of 007 revolved around the appointment of Daniel Craig to the leading role; a more pressing question was whether the ailing Bond franchise itself deserved to survive. The solution, as controlled by the director Martin Campbell, is to put the narrative on a low-carb diet: no fatty subplots, no indigestible villains, a minimum of frills. Our hero is pure protein, frequently bloodied, and the movie is rich in tenderizing violence; the torture scene, lifted grimly from Ian Fleming's novel, is unfit for younger viewers. The plot requires Bond to outwit Le Chiffre (Mads Mikkelsen), a banker to the world's terrorists; given the film's paucity of gadgets, 007 must rely on his gambling skills, his fists, and the comforting presence of Vesper Lynd (Eva Green), who introduces herself with the words "I'm the money." The movie is ominously long, but, for the first time in many years, we are steered away from silliness toward Fleming's vision of a bitter and undependable world. With Judi Dench as M.—*A.L.* (11/20/06) (In wide release.)

DÉJÀ VU

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (In wide release.)

FAST FOOD NATION

Eric Schlosser's 2001 book "Fast Food Nation" was a scathing look at the way McDonald's, Burger King, and other chains have affected the culture and morale, as well as the diet and health, of the United States. The fiction that Schlosser and the director Richard Linklater have created out of the book is pretty much a mess, with narrative lines that go astray or simply wind up in the air and sizable blocks of verbal exposition in which one character or another holds forth on the sins of the meatpackers or the restaurants themselves. The most important plotline is devoted to some attractive young Mexicans who illegally cross the border and wind up exploited in a huge slaughterhouse in Cody, Colorado. The scenes of the abattoir are disturbing, in the tradition of Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle," but the movie is fragmentary and unrealized.—*D.D.* (11/27/06) (In wide release.)

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

Movies about movies are as old as the movies; Christopher Guest, who has already made a movie about the compromises to which filmmakers submit ("The Big Picture," from 1989), now returns to the fray. His new farce stars Catherine O'Hara as the leading lady in a cheap family drama entitled "Home for Purim"—too shabby and antiquated, frankly, to be credible. She hears a whisper of an Oscar nomination and sets about cranking up the buzz; the same goes for her co-stars, played by Harry Shearer and Parker Posey. Guest himself takes the role of the director, and brings along his usual repertory players, including Bob Balaban, Michael McKean, Eugene Levy, and John Michael Higgins. They are as welcome as ever—so is Fred Willard, playing the host of a Hollywood-crazed TV show—but, by the standards of this group's previous projects, such as "Best in Show" or Rob Reiner's "This Is Spinal Tap," the result feels both tame and unsubtle. Only O'Hara finds pathos amid the delusions of the trade; the sight of her, surgically enhanced and squeezed into a minidress, is almost too much to bear. She deserves some sort of award.—*A.L.* (12/4/06) (In wide release.)

THE FOUNTAIN

Darren Aronofsky's new film, his first since "Requiem for a Dream," stars Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz in three interwoven roles. In the world of today, he is a research scientist and she is his dying wife. In the sixteenth century, he is a conquistador in the jungles of Central America and she is the queen who sends him there. In the distant future, he is a space traveller and she is his saintly muse, floating together through the void in a lovely bubble. One knows how they feel. The link between these tales appears to be a tree, the life-giving properties of which have turned it into a grail for those in search of eternity. Viewers who like to construe "2001: A Space Odyssey" as a serious philosophical statement should have no problem with Aronofsky's movie, whereas more skeptical souls will treat it as a finely acted, beautifully shot compendium of nonsense—well-meaning, if any actual meaning can be discerned. With Ellen Burstyn, as elegantly persuasive as ever, in the role of the scientist's boss.—*A.L.* (12/4/06) (In wide release.)

HAPPY FEET

This exuberantly animated film, directed like a musical Biblical epic by George Miller, concerns a misfit penguin, Mumble (voiced by Elijah Wood), whose gift for tap dancing (extraordinarily motion-captured from Savion Glover's footwork) is seen as somewhat un-penguin by members of his all-singing tribe. When their fish supply dwindles, Mumble is blamed and forced to leave the flock, but his wanderings eventually lead him to discover the true nature of the problem. Along the way, many inconvenient truths are addressed, and the film's surprising political resonance gives it an independent, risk-taking tone. Yet it's all gently handled, and the quasi-gospel musical numbers (including a strikingly beautiful take on the Queen tune "Somebody to Love") and the soaring, lovely animation combine to make pop entertainment at its best.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

HELLO, SISTER!

Erich von Stroheim's last film as a director—a Depression-era tale of poverty, lust, jealousy, and rage—was partly reshot by committee yet still bears its originator's forceful mark. Peggy (Boots Mallory), a lonely young newcomer to New York who toils in a factory and lives in a Hell's Kitchen tenement, meets Jimmy (James Dunn), a lowly bank clerk with big dreams. Their affair involves premarital sex and an unwanted pregnancy, but Jimmy is gleefully ready to marry Peggy until he hears sordid rumors from his buddy Mack, who wanted her first, and her homely and envious friend Millie (Zasu Pitts, from Stroheim's epic "Greed"). En route to the predictably sentimental conclusion, the horror of base emotions and grubby lives prevails. An interminably brutal fight between the drunk and horny Mack (who tried to rape Peggy) and the streetwise Mona (who rescued her) thrashes down a staircase to a forced entry into Mona's room, and Jimmy and Peggy's shrieking breakup under the streetlights in a soaking winter rainstorm is a nightmarish scourging of innocence. Based on a play by Dawn Powell. Released in 1933.—*Richard Brody* (Film Forum; Dec. 10-11.)

THE HISTORY BOYS

This adaptation of Alan Bennett's effervescent play comes alive on the screen. The setting is Yorkshire in the nineteen-eighties—a grammar school at which a group of eight boys, seven of them very bright, are being prepped for mind-crushing exams that could lead to a place to read history at Oxford or Cambridge. No actual classrooms could ever have been as animated as these: the boys talk back to their teachers, and everyone seems familiar with the details of everyone else's private life. Bennett's conceit is that the classroom is a theatre in which learning is acquired as much by performance as by study. There, wit is a form of action, and music and poetry create and release emotions too private to be spoken. The two principal teachers are Hector (Richard Griffiths), a sixtyish humanist who believes in educating souls, and his antagonist, Irwin (Stephen Campbell Moore), a slick new man, who teaches clever exam-taking skills. With Dominic Cooper as Dakin, the cunning, dark-eyed seducer, and Samuel Barnett as the smooth-cheeked Posner, physically younger than the other boys and hopelessly in love with Dakin. Posner sings Rodgers and Hart ballads; he's like a Shakespearean boy actor offering plaintive Elizabethan ballads in the interludes between action.—*D.D.* (11/27/06) (In wide release.)

INLAND EMPIRE

David Lynch's three-hour head trip, made over a two-year span on charmingly low-definition video, was crafted as lovingly—and as obliviously—as a home movie. The central story concerns an actress (Laura Dern) who has been out of work and in gilded isolation with her tyrannical Polish husband (Peter J. Lucas); when she gets a starring role in a major movie, she finds her identity merging with that of the character, an adulterous wife. When Lynch sticks with his straightforward view of how things are done in Hollywood, the film briefly comes alive as a trenchant, nuanced report from the front. But he also shoehorns in lugubrious scenes from Poland, a sitcom apartment inhabited by people wearing rabbit heads, and mysterious appearances and disappearances, and jumbles the strands together as a pretentious puzzle. The resulting grab bag of Lynchian motifs and methods—grotesque character actors, saccharine pop music, grind-house camp, horror clichés, gratuitous gore, chipmunk voices, jejune sex play, theatrical tableaux, and mystical hokum—quickly devolves into self-parody. Dern gives a virtuoso performance, albeit in an overwrought, numbing void.—*R.B.* (IFC Center.)

KWAIDAN

Based on Lafcadio Hearn's Japanese folk tales, Masaki Kobayashi's acclaimed four-part anthology of ghost stories resembles the languorously haunting high kitsch of Powell and Pressburger's "Tales of Hoffmann." Kobayashi painted the expressionistic sets himself, worked out the splashy mood lighting, and, most important, coördinated the visual elements with the innovative music of Toru Takemitsu. The composer rooted his score in such indigenous Japanese sounds as the striking of certain hard stones that—according to one authority—are found only on the island of Shikoku. The results tickle the ear and tingle the spine. In Japanese.—*Michael Sragow* (IFC Center; Dec. 8-10.)

THE QUEEN

The new Stephen Frears film considers the deadlock, both grieving and comical, that followed the death of the Princess of Wales, in 1997. On the one hand, the Queen (Helen Mirren), believing it to be a private matter, stays and broods in Scotland with the Duke of Edinburgh (James Cromwell) and Prince Charles (Alex Jennings). On the other hand, Tony Blair (Michael Sheen), sensing a thirst for public mourning and thus a unique political opportunity, urges Her Majesty to return to London and face down the mob. And so she does; the crux of the drama comes when Mirren turns to the crowd outside Buckingham Palace and, with one smile, quashes any prospect of rebellion. The script, by Peter Morgan, relies largely on well-grounded speculation, and sticklers for accuracy will find the whole thing straying beyond belief; but, thanks to the careful performances, you subscribe all too readily to the movie's suggestion of a divided land—of a Britain caught between the trustworthy stiffness of tradition and a liberalism that is open not just to emotional honesty but to the coarseness of modern excess. With Helen McCrory as a distinctly unceremonious Cherie Blair.—*A.L.* (10/9/06) (In wide release.)

TENACIOUS D IN THE PICK OF DESTINY

Rarely has calculated stupidity made as much sense as in this vulgar, cartoonish rock opera, starring Jack Black and Kyle Gass as a pair of metal-worshipping musical losers in quest of stardom, redemption, and the rent money. J.B. (Black), a runaway from his stifling Christian family (Meat Loaf plays his father), and K.G. (Gass), a middle-aged busker who still lives off his parents, team up to make music; in the hope of winning an open-mike night, they set out to steal a legendary guitar pick (made from the tooth of Satan) from the Rock and Roll History Museum. The dumbed-

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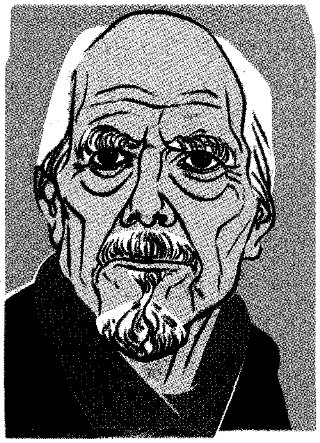
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
JUSTICE DELAYED

The late director Robert Altman had a temper, but one can only be awed by the equanimity of a man who could make a film as great as "Vincent & Theo," from 1990, and not spend the rest of his life mourning the public's indifference to it. The movie is indeed abrupt and harsh, but its rewards go beyond any discomfort that it causes. Working with the screenwriter Julian Mitchell, Altman tells the parallel stories of the van Gogh brothers. Vincent is inarticulate, obsessive, willful, and mad, and Tim Roth endows him with a stumpy walk and an air of self-enclosure that gives way, now and then, to a stare so intense that it takes possession of whatever it lands on. Theo, an art dealer played by Paul Rhys, tries to live as a sexual being, an employee, and a bourgeois, but feels happy only when he has one of his brother's unsalable paintings in his hands. The claims of art against mere life have never been made more forcefully. The gold-and-green landscapes around Arles justify van Gogh's inspired use of them.



—*David Denby*

down comedy, directed by Liam Lynch and co-written by Lynch and the two stars, depicts rock as the music of channelled, normative rebellion and presents the pursuit of happiness as an inner battle between good and evil—but sitting there to get at this ideological substrate is like having teeth drilled. With bombastic, garrulous music dedicated to their holy trinity of Led Zeppelin, the Who, and Beethoven, Black and Gass may send a generation of unsuspecting teens running to Liberace. With Dave Grohl as a hypersexed Satan and Ben Stiller (who executive-produced) as a guitar-store guru.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

VANINA VANINI
Roberto Rossellini's 1961 adaptation of a novella by Stendhal, about politics and love in the repressive Papal States of the eighteen-twenties, is a cold historical thriller and a critique of romantic passion. Pietro Missirilli (Laurent Terzieff), one of the insurgent Carbonari fighting clerical power, is wounded in a chase and rescued by the mistress of Count Vanini, whose daughter Vanina (Sandra Milo) becomes the adventurer's lover. She wants to marry him in secret and to extricate him from the movement that gives his life meaning, but is hemmed in by the ever more intrusive police state, which her father-confessor serves as an informant. In romantic captivity alongside Vanina, Pietro is a bitter, caged animal, and Rossellini is equally ironic about the daring woman who, living for love, becomes an angel of death, the intrepid revolutionary who is good for nothing but revolt and is incapable of happiness, and the sick society in which the perversion of power and the abuse of spiritual office fatally distort the emotions. In Italian.—*R.B.* (MOMA; Dec. 10.)

VOLVER
The new film from Pedro Almodóvar stars Penélope Cruz as Raimunda, who is soon seen mopping up the blood of her murdered husband—slain by her daughter, whom he tried to abuse—and stashing him in a freezer. This being Almodóvar, such horrors have a jaunty edge, and the colors (red gore against blue floor) are picked out with an unembarrassed eye. The story is more or less a male-free zone, and any other director would be chastised for training his camera so devotedly on a succession of cleavages. We follow Raimunda's timid sister (Lola Dueñas) as she mourns her aunt (Chus Lampreave) and then takes up, quite happily, with the ghost of her dead mother (Carmen Maura). Misfortune has befallen every generation, yet the victims are more resigned than surprised, as if, like the cheery local hooker (María Isabel Díaz), they know all men are traitors to begin with. Hitchcockians will warm to the credit sequence, which could be by Saul Bass, and to the score, which shimmers with echoes of Bernard Herrmann; even Hitchcock, however, might have balked at the level of emotional control that Almodóvar exerts upon his characters. You feel yourself gripped by a beautiful machine, engineered for the finest melodrama. In Spanish.—*A.L.* (11/6/06) (In wide release.)

Also Playing

FLUSHED AWAY: In wide release. **THE DEPARTED:** In wide release. **THE NATIVITY STORY:** In wide release. **TURISTAS:** In wide release.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—"Voom HD Lab Presents." Dec. 7 at 7:30: Short high-definition videos, including "Bridges" (2006, Fred Barney Taylor). ♦ In première. Dec. 8 at 7 and Dec. 9-10 at 4:30 and 7: "Joan Jonas: Study of the Artist with Dog" (2006, Brigitte Cornand). ♦ "Essential Cinema." Dec. 9 at 5: Short silent films by Stan Brakhage, including "The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes" (1971). ♦ Dec. 9 at 7:30: "The Text of Light" (1974, Brakhage; silent). ♦ Dec. 10 at 5:30: Short films by Robert Breer (1952-73). ♦ Dec. 10 at 7:30: Short films by Bruce Conner and Tony Conrad.

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—"Czech Modernism." Except where noted, all films are in Czech. Dec. 8 at 6:50: "The River" (1934, Josef Rovenský). ♦ Dec. 8 at 9:15: "Crisis" (1938, Herbert Kline; in English). ♦ Dec. 9 at 4:30 and 9:15: "Heave Ho!" (1934, Martin Fric). ♦ Dec. 9 at 6:50: "Virginity" (1937, Otakar Vávra). ♦ Dec. 10 at 4:30 and 9:15: "The Distant Journey" (1949, Alfred Radok). ♦ Dec. 10 at 6:50: "Faithless Marijka" (1934, Vladislav Vancura). ♦ Special screening. Dec. 12 at 7: "Jubal" (1956, Delmer Daves), followed by a discussion with the critic Elliott Stein.

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—In revival. Dec. 6-12 at 1:30, 3:30, 5:30, 7:30, and 9:30: "Two or Three Things I Know About Her" (1966, Jean-Luc Godard; in French). ♦ Through Dec. 21: "Fox Before the Code." Dec. 6 at 1:25, 5:20, and 9:15 and Dec. 7 at 1:25 and 5:20: "Just Imagine" (1930, David Butler). ♦ Dec. 6 at 3:35 and 7:30 and Dec. 7 at 3:35: "Bottoms Up" (1934, Butler). ♦ Dec. 7 at 7:30: "After Tomorrow" (1932, Frank Borzage). ♦ Dec. 7 at 9:10: "The First Year" (1932, William K. Howard). ♦ Dec. 8 at 1, 5:10, and 9:10: "Born to Be Bad" (1934, Lowell Sherman). ♦ Dec. 8 at 2:15, 6:25, and 10:25: "Broadway Bad" (1933, Sidney Lanfield). ♦ Dec. 8 at 3:30 and 7:30: "Arizona to Broadway" (1933, James Tinling). ♦ Dec. 9 at 1:10, 4:25, and 7:40: "Now I'll Tell" (1934, Edwin Burke). ♦ Dec. 9 at 3, 6:15, and 9:30: "Blood Money" (1933, Rowland Brown). ♦ Dec. 10 at 1, 4:15, and 7:30: "Call Her Savage" (1932, John Francis Dillon). ♦ Dec. 10 at 2:50, 6:05, and 9:20 and Dec. 11 at 2:50 and 6:05: "Hello, Sister!" (†). ♦ Dec. 11 at 8: "Peter Mintun's Movietone Follies of 2007," a program of live music by Mintun and film clips. ♦ Dec. 12 at 1, 5:20, and 9:40: "Chandu the Magician" (1932, William Cameron Menzies and Marcel Varnel). ♦ Dec. 12 at 2:25 and 6:45: "Bulldog Drummond Strikes Back" (1934, Roy Del Ruth). ♦ Dec. 12 at 4 and 8:20: "The Spider" (1931, Menzies and Kenneth MacKenna).

IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—"Essential Art House: 50 Years of Janus Films." Dec. 8-10 at noon: "Kwaidan" (†). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." Dec. 8-9: "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" (2001, John Cameron Mitchell), accompanied by live shadowcast performances.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—Films produced by Walter Mirisch. Dec. 6 at 6: "The Landlord" (1970, Hal Ashby). ♦ Dec. 10 at 2: "West Side Story" (1961, Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise). ♦ Through Dec. 22: The films of Roberto Rossellini. Except where noted, all films are in Italian. Dec. 6 at 8:30 and Dec. 8 at 3:15: "The Man of the Cross" (1943). ♦ Dec. 8 at 6:15 and Dec. 9 at 1: "Joan of Arc at the Stake" (1954; in French). ♦ Dec. 8 at 8:15 and Dec. 9 at 3: "The White Ship" (1941) and "Underwater Fantasy" (1938). ♦ Dec. 9 at 5: "Augustine of Hippo" (1972). ♦ Dec. 9 at 7:30: "It Was Night in Rome" (1960; in Italian and English). ♦ Dec. 10 at 3 and Dec. 11 at 6: "L'Amore" (1947-48). ♦ Dec. 10 at 3: "Vanina Vanini" (†). ♦ Dec. 10 at 5:15: "General Della Rovere" (1959). ♦ "Prix Jean Vigo." Dec. 7 at 6:30 and Dec. 9 at 2: "Ramparts of Clay" (1970, Jean-Louis Bertucelli; in French and Arabic). ♦ "Asian Cinevisions." Dec. 8 at 8:30 and Dec. 9 at 4:15: "The Last Communist" (2006, Amir Muhammad; in Mandarin, Cantonese, Malay, and Tamil). ♦ Special event. Dec. 11 at 8: "World Trade Center" (2006, Oliver Stone), followed by a discussion with the director.

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—The films of Alejandro González Iñárritu. Dec. 8 at 7:30: "Amores Perros" (2000; in Spanish). ♦ Through Dec. 31: The films of Jacques Rivette. All films are in French. Dec. 9 at 2: "Out 1," episodes 1-4 (1971). ♦ Dec. 10 at 2: "Out 1," episodes 5-8 (1971).

PIONEER THEATRE
155 E. 3rd St. (212-591-0434)—In première. Dec. 6-12 at 9: "Hermanas" (2005, Julia Solomonoff; in Spanish). ♦ In revival. Dec. 11 at 7: "Häxan" (1922, Benjamin Christensen; silent).

SUNSHINE CINEMA
143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—"Sunshine@Midnight." Dec. 8-9: "Vertigo" (1958, Alfred Hitchcock).

THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—"Thalia Film Classics." Dec. 10 and Dec. 12

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at 4:30: "Andrei Rublev" (1966, Andrei Tarkovsky; in Russian).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—Austrian films. All films are in German. Dec. 6 at 2: "Zorro's Bar Mitzvah" (2005, Ruth Beckermann). ♦ Dec. 6 at 4: "Northern Skirts" (1999, Barbara Albert). ♦ Dec. 7 at 4:30: "Models" (1997, Ulrich Seidl). ♦ Special screenings. Dec. 6 at 7: "Hollywoodland" (2006, Allen Coulter), followed by a discussion with Ben Affleck. ♦ Dec. 7 at 7:30: "Bad Company" (1972, Robert Benton), followed by a Q. & A. with the director. ♦ Through Dec. 26: "Spanish Cinema Now." Except where noted, all films are in Spanish. Dec. 8 at 2 and 6:30 and Dec. 10 at 6:20: "DarkBlueAlmostBlack" (2006, Daniel Sánchez Arévalo). ♦ Dec. 8 at 4:15, Dec. 9 at 4:50, and Dec. 12 at 1: "Crossing the Border" (2006, Carlos Iglesias). ♦ Dec. 8 at 9 and Dec. 9 at 7: "Celia's Lives" (2006, Antonio Chavarrías). ♦ Dec. 9 at 2 and Dec. 10 at 8:30: "Alatriste" (2006, Agustín Díaz Yanes). ♦ Dec. 10 at 4:30: "The Tower of the Seven Hunchbacks" (1944, Edgar Neville).

READINGS AND TALKS

PAUL MULDOON
The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet reads from his latest book, "Horse Latitudes." (Housing Works Bookstore Café, 126 Crosby St. 212-334-3324. Dec. 6 at 7.)

LAUREN BACALL
The actress discusses her latest memoir, "By Myself and Then Some." (Barnes & Noble, Broadway at 66th St. No tickets necessary. Dec. 6 at 7.)

POETRY SOCIETY OF AMERICA
The winners of the society's Chapbook Fellowship read alongside Yusef Komunyakaa, Timothy Donnelly, and other established members of the poetry scene. (New School, 66 W. 12th St. For more information, call 212-254-9628. Dec. 7 at 7:30.)

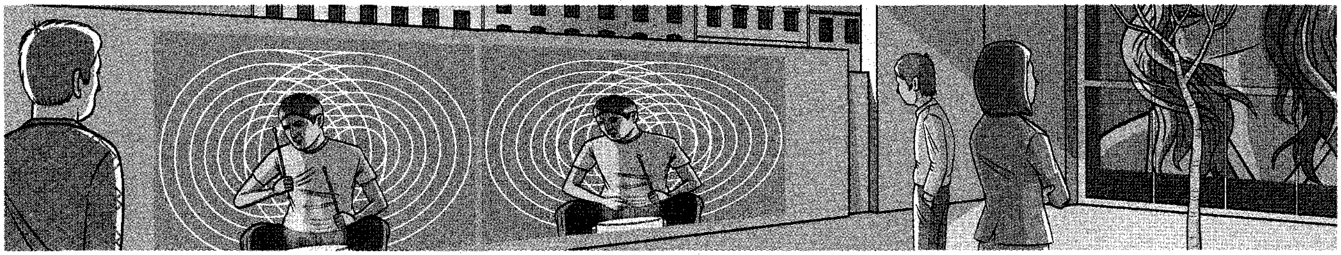
"FROM BLOGGER TO AUTHOR"
Julie Powell ("Julie and Julia: 365 Days, 524 Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen"), Maxwell Gillingham-Ryan ("Apartment Therapy"), and other bloggers turned published authors join agents and editors for a discussion about how it is done. (Small Press Center, 20 W. 44th St. For more information, call 212-929-2588. Dec. 11 at 7.)

"DIALOGUES: ISLAMIC WORLD-U.S.-THE WEST"
The New York University program dedicated to better communication between the Muslim world and the West presents Abdesselam Cheddadi, a professor in the faculty of educational sciences at the University of Muhammad V, in Rabat, Morocco, who will talk about the Muslim philosopher Ibn Khaldun, to mark the six-hundredth anniversary of his death. With Richard Bulliet, a professor of history at the Middle East Institute at Columbia University. In English and French. (La Maison Française, 16 Washington Mews, at University Pl. For reservations, which are required, call 212-998-8693. Dec. 12 at 6:30.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

BIG APPLE CIRCUS
Manhattan's one-ring wonder returns for its twenty-ninth season with "Step Right Up!" Inspired by the carnival barker's call, the show features Gilded Age costumes, a fantasy seaside resort setting, and the Russian aerialists Irina and Andrey Perfilyev, the English equestrienne Yasmine Smart, the Australian cyclist Justin Case, and the Zhengzhou Acrobatic Troupe, from China, among other awe-inspiring acts. (Damrosch Park, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. Through Jan. 7.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES
The jewelry sales at **Sotheby's** this week (Dec. 6-7) offer not only impressive diamonds and gems of all sorts but a whole variety of curious and sumptuous decorative marvels that one can wear, like a striking Art Deco pendant by Georges Fouquet featuring a large, intensely hued oval turquoise, bordered by sapphires and citrines, hanging on a black cord, or a Van Cleef & Arpels brooch depicting a pagoda in a Japanese landscape, fashioned out of precious stones. Even more distinctive are the creations of the Italian nineteenth-century "revivalist" jewellers Castellani and Giuliano, who made one-of-a-kind pieces inspired by classical, Etruscan, ancient Egyptian, Byzantine, and Renaissance jewelry using such materials as yellow gold, micromosaics, scarabs, engraved gems, and enamelwork. An auction of antiquities will also be held on Dec. 6, while the following days are devoted to watches (Dec. 8), wines (Dec. 9), and books and manuscripts (Dec. 11). (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ If you've always wanted your own mummy, this week's antiquities auction at **Christie's** (Dec. 7) has just the thing, complete with a richly decorated fig-wood sarcophagus, from the tenth century B.C. Those with less exotic tastes may prefer the house's sale of ancient jewelry on the same day, where one can pick up a pair of exquisite Greek earrings from the Hellenistic period, each with a gold figure of winged Eros, or a set of three sardonyx cameos set in gold, from the late Roman Empire. Two days of wine sales follow (Dec. 8-9). (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) ♦ On Dec. 7, **Swann** holds one of its periodic sales of photographs and photograph-related books, which includes a self-portrait with movie camera by the protean *Life* photographer Gordon Parks, also known as the director of "Shaft." (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.)



ON THE HORIZON

MOVIES
PLAYING THEM AGAIN
Dec. 22-Jan. 11

In his evolving roles as cerebral comic, nebbishy hero, and aging pariah, Woody Allen exemplifies the New York imagination. He is also one of the cinema's great urban folklorists: his decade of works from "Annie Hall" through "Hannah and Her Sisters" is a living history of the age of Bloomingdale's. Film Forum offers twenty-eight of his films, from "What's Up, Tiger Lily?" through "Sweet and Lowdown." (212-727-8110.)

THE THEATRE
OPERA OEUVRE
Jan. 5-14

The New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players present full-scale productions, complete with a twenty-five-piece orchestra, of "The Yeomen of the Guard," "The Mikado," and, for one night only, "The Rose of Persia." (212-581-1212.)

ART
LARGER THAN LIFE
Jan. 16-Feb. 12

Each evening for four weeks, the video artist Doug Aitken will project a piece called "Sleepwalkers" on the exterior walls of the Museum of Modern Art. Working with performers like Tilda Swinton and Donald Sutherland, Aitken will investigate the decades of conversation among buildings in the canyons of midtown. (212-708-9400.)

NIGHT LIFE
GREAT BALLS OF FIRE
Jan. 19

In September, the rock-and-roll legend Jerry Lee Lewis, who is seventy-one, released "Last Man Standing," an album of duets with Jimmy Page, Neil Young, and others. The Killer comes to the B. B. King Blues Club on his own. (212-997-4144.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
STRING THINGS
Jan. 19

Over the past decade, the Takács Quartet—an Anglo-Hungarian ensemble that recently welcomed a new American violist, Geraldine Walther—has gone from being respectable to indispensable. Its only New York concert of the season takes place at the Metropolitan Museum and features string quartets by Debussy, Shostakovich, and Beethoven. (212-570-3949.)

Doug Aitken's projection "Sleepwalkers," at the Museum of Modern Art.

MICHAEL WELDON

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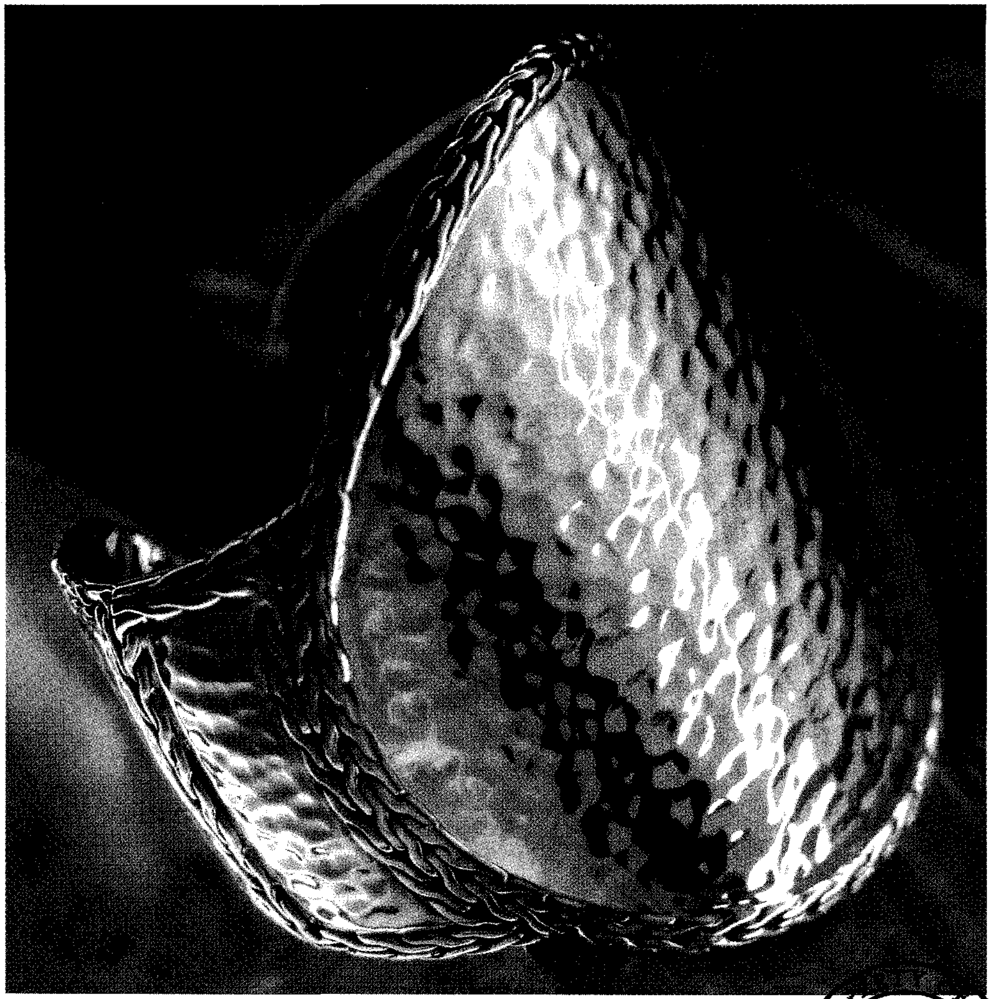

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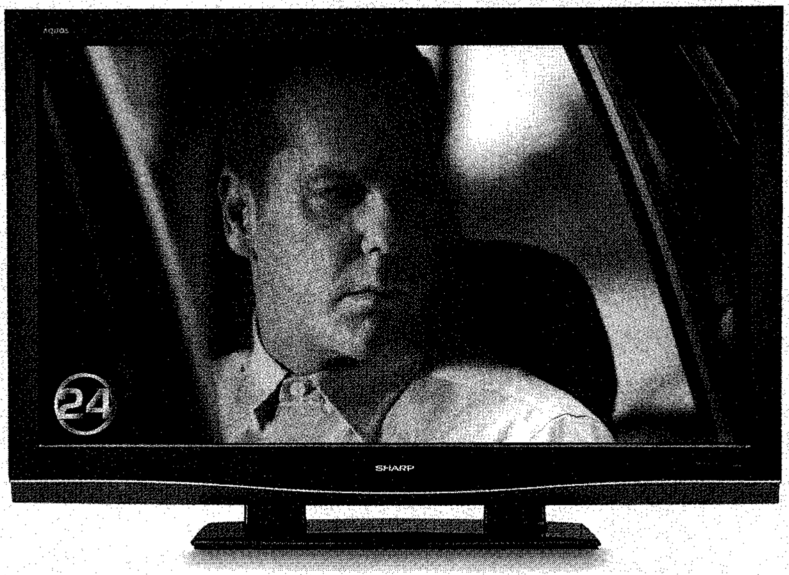


Starring Emmy®-winning Kiefer Sutherland, "24" can be seen Mondays, 9–10 P.M. ET/PT on FOX.

FILMING 24

The man behind the cameras ("24" has at least two of them rolling at all times), **director of photography Rodney Charters**, considers the series "the world's longest feature film." Shot with an edgy energy and a restless camera that stresses the drama of the plot and the acting, the show offers viewers complete immersion in the past five seasons on DVD and new weekly Season Six episodes starting in January on FOX TV.

What's distinctive about the way "24" is shot?

CHARTERS: The format of the show lends itself to a realistic, feature style of coverage. We want to take you and grab you and rush you hell-bent into chaos along with the characters, as if you're in a very real world. From the beginning we didn't want it to look like normal TV and were careful to plot scenes and camera moves so that we could film entire scenes in one take.

Describe the functions of the two cameras for each scene.

CHARTERS: Our "A" (primary) camera tends to follow characters as if it's a documentary camera, and the "B" (secondary) camera is usually behind something to give the audience the perspective of a voyeur.

How do you deal with lighting, when each episode is supposed to represent a specific hour of the day but obviously takes longer to shoot?

CHARTERS: We try to take advantage of the environment we're in, embellish it, and juggle the damage. It's not difficult in subterranean vaults and dark and dreary spaces. The biggest challenge is when the script calls for you to be outside in sunny California. So you have to "silk" (hang panels of silk overhead to diffuse sunlight) what you can, or restage the scene inside a structure like an aircraft hangar to better control the lighting.

What effect has HDTV had on close-ups?

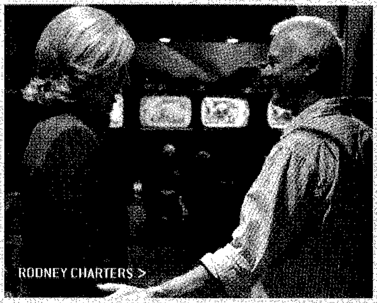
CHARTERS: It changed the limits of what you could and could not get away with. With HD, there are four times more pixels to deal with in the image. Makeup, hair, wardrobe, set construction—all the material in front of the lens—became a target for laxity. We had to look more carefully at all of these things and treat them like it was a feature film.

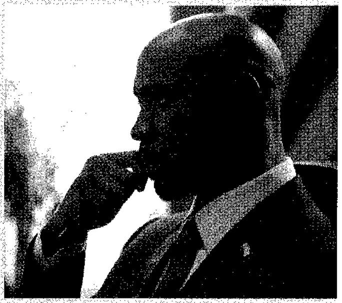
How does broadcasting in HDTV make a difference?

CHARTERS: The biggest thing for me is the fact that my master, which I see in the lab on a million dollars' worth of equipment, can be seen at home under the same conditions. The colors are the same, the black levels are the same, and the image quality is the same. If you have a good HDTV set and a clean signal from your cable company, it's pretty damn impressive to look at.

Will watching "24" on an HDTV change a viewer's experience?

CHARTERS: I believe that we are in the dying age of going out to the movies. For a modest investment, people can set up a screening room at home with a better picture and better sound—and they're among friends rather than strangers. And with DVDs, the show starts when you want.


RODNEY CHARTERS >



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PROLOGUE

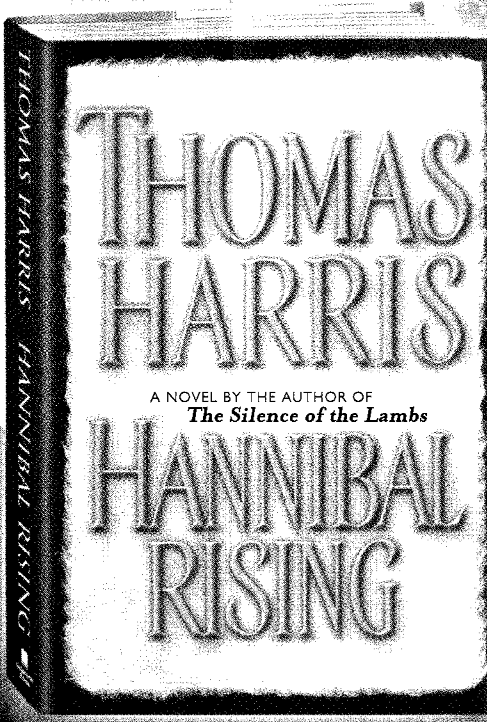
The door to Dr. Hannibal Lecter's memory palace is in the darkness at the center of his mind and it has a latch that can be found by touch alone.

Exhibits devoted to his earliest years differ from the other archives in being incomplete. Some are fragments, like painted Attic shards held together by blank plaster. Other rooms hold sound and motion, great snakes wrestling and heaving in the dark, lit in flashes. Pleas and screaming fill some places on the grounds where Hannibal himself cannot go. But the palace corridors do not echo screaming, and there is music if you like.

Here in the hot darkness of Hannibal Lecter's mind, let us feel together for the latch. Finding it, let us elect for music in the corridors and, looking neither left nor right, go to the Hall of the Beginning where the displays are most fragmentary.

We will add to them what we have learned elsewhere, from records and interviews, from forensics and the mute postures of the dead. By our efforts we may watch as the beast within turns from the teat and, working upwind, enters the world.

Thomas Harris



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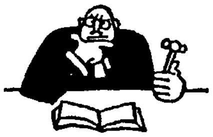
THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
HOT AND COLD

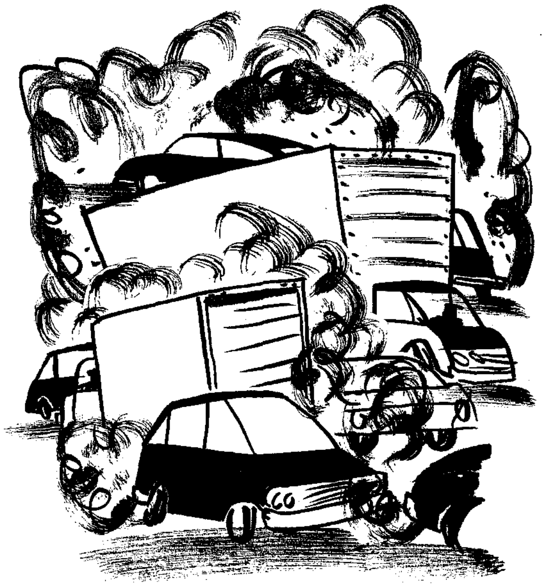


Thirty-six years ago this month, President Nixon signed the Clean Air Act in a ceremony in the Roosevelt Room of the White House. The act—the product of a bipartisan effort extraordinary even for a day when bipartisanship was unexceptional—had been hammered out by a group of senators that included Democrats Edmund Muskie, Birch Bayh, and Thomas Eagleton, and Republicans Bob Dole, Howard Baker, and Robert Packwood. The bill passed the Senate unanimously, prompting Senator Eugene McCarthy to tell Muskie, "Ed, you finally found an issue better than motherhood." At the signing ceremony, Nixon called the Clean Air Act a "historic piece of legislation," but he stressed that it was only a first step. "I think that 1970 will be known as the year of the beginning," he said.

Nostalgia for the Nixon Administration is an increasingly acceptable emotion these days, and it was hard not to feel it last week, when oral arguments were heard in Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency. The suit, which has been described as "one of the most important environmental cases ever," is the first on global warming to reach the United States Supreme Court. The plaintiffs—a group that includes, in addition to Massachusetts, eleven states, three cities, and thirteen environmental groups—hope to compel the Bush Administration to impose limits on greenhouse-gas emissions. If they are successful, the operation of every power plant and factory as well as the design of every new car in the country could potentially be affected. At the center of the suit is the Clean Air Act, and the question of just how ambitious its authors intended it to be.

The Bush Administration's position, in keeping with its general stance toward regulation but in contrast to its general stance toward executive power, is that its hands are tied. The E.P.A., it argues, lacks the authority to limit greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act, because when the act was drafted global warming wasn't yet recognized as a problem. The "relevant provisions of the law," it states in its brief to the Supreme Court, are "best construed not to authorize regulation . . . for the purpose of addressing global climate change." Furthermore, the Administration asserts, even if the Clean Air Act did grant the E.P.A. the power to treat CO_2 as a pollutant, the agency shouldn't—and wouldn't—exercise it.

Just about anyone familiar with the Clean Air Act can see the White House's narrow reading of the law for what it is: a deliberate misreading. The act was expressly constructed to allow the E.P.A. to regulate substances known to be dangerous and also substances that might in the future be revealed to be so. Danger was defined as broadly as possible; among the many possible hazards listed in the statute are "effects on soils, water, crops, vegetation, manmade materials, animals, wildlife, weather, visibility, and climate." In a friend-of-the-court brief for the plaintiffs, four former E.P.A. administrators—including Russell Train, who headed the agency under Nixon, and William Reilly, who led it under George Bush senior—point out that Congress clearly directed the E.P.A. to "regulate air pollution based on new and changing scientific information." The four go on to note that the E.P.A. has, many times in the past, used its authority



ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

to control pollutants whose dangers could not have been foreseen in 1970; for example, in the early nineteen-nineties, faced with data on ozone depletion, the agency issued a timetable for phasing out chlorofluorocarbons.

But just because the Bush Administration is willfully misconstruing the Clean Air Act doesn't mean that it will lose. Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency comes to the Supreme Court via the D.C. Circuit Court, whose three-judge panel issued three disparate opinions on the case. One of the judges ruled for the states. The second ruled for the E.P.A., on the ground that the agency could decline to regulate greenhouse gases if it chose. The third sided with the second, but gave different reasons: the plaintiffs, he asserted, lacked the standing to sue, since they were suffering no particularized harm (beyond the danger to humanity at large). During last week's oral arguments, the plaintiffs' standing was the focus of fully half the questions. James Milkey, the Massachusetts assistant attorney general who argued the case on behalf of the states, was midway through an explanation of how coastal regions would be especially hard hit by global warming when Justice Antonin Scalia interrupted him.

> SCALIA: I thought that standing requires imminent harm. If you haven't been harmed already, you have to show the harm is imminent. Is this harm imminent?
>
> MILKEY: It is, Your Honor. We have shown that [rises in] sea levels are already occurring from the current amounts of greenhouse gases in the air, and that means it is only going to get worse as the—
>
> SCALIA: When? I mean, when is the predicted cataclysm?

Meanwhile, from the plaintiffs' perspective, even a victory could be vexed. Should the court decide that the states have standing and that the E.P.A. has the authority to regulate greenhouse gases, responsibility for writing those regulations would still fall to the agency. Given who's in charge of the E.P.A. these days, it's hard to see how this would represent a solution. (Imagine entrusting campus alcohol policy to the guys at Delta Tau Chi.)

The Bush Administration's indifference to global warming might seem at this point like just one of many failures—of will, of imagination, of leadership. In future decades, it will come to seem more significant: at a moment when there was still a chance to avert the worst effects of climate change, the United States couldn't be bothered to.

The plaintiffs in Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency have brought the suit out of desperation. What is really needed, as they would be the first to acknowledge, is immediate action on a scale commensurate with what's at stake: not an invocation of the Clean Air Act but a new law of comparable vision that would lay out clear—and aggressive—targets for greenhouse-gas reductions. The Democrats should use their newly won congressional majorities to pass such legislation, and President Bush, following Nixon's example, should sign it. That, at least, would be a beginning.

—*Elizabeth Kolbert*

ON CALL
FIFTY SHOTS

Al Sharpton learned of Sean Bell's death while riding in a town car to his office. It was nine-forty-five in the morning on what was to be Bell's wedding day, or about six hours after Bell and his friends had left the Kalua Cabaret, in Jamaica, Queens, trailed by an undercover police officer who thought they had a gun. "The phone rang, and it was a minister friend of mine, Reverend Timothy Wright, the Grammy-nominated gospel singer," Sharpton recalled last week. "He said a young man in his church, his cousin, had been killed, and the family needed information." Sharpton, who says that he and his cohorts "aren't ambulance chasers; we're the ambulance itself"—a vehicle called upon to deliver community justice—directed his driver to make a detour across the Triboro Bridge, heading toward Jamaica. "We had no idea at the time that it was fifty shots," he said. "The first twenty-four hours, it just kept getting worse, from 'It was his wedding,' to 'He's dead,' to 'He had two kids,' to 'They handcuffed the other guys at the hospital.' " (Joseph Guzman and Trent Benefield, Bell's friends, took eleven bullets and three bullets, respectively, and were briefly chained to their beds in the I.C.U.) "It was like you dreamed you're falling off a cliff and you're never hitting the ground."

That night, Sharpton received phone calls from Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly, Mayor Bloomberg, and the Queens District Attorney, Richard Brown. By last Wednesday, or Day Five, Jesse Jackson had flown in, at Sharpton's request. The two reverends assembled with the victim's friends and family at the scene of the shooting for a staged prayer session, during which Jackson called the incident "part of our national dilemma," invoking not only Abner Louima but also Medgar Evers. A black woman leaned out the window of a passing school bus and shouted at the TV crews, "Don't be harassing our people out here." Nearby telephone poles had been covered with flyers: one asked any witnesses to the shooting to call N.Y.P.D. internal affairs, while another advertised an "Outrage March Against Police Murder," sponsored by, among others, the New Black Panther Party, the Bloods, and the Crips.

Later that day, Sharpton and Jackson visited the NY1 TV studios, in Chelsea, where Sharpton proposed a kind of reverse boycott—"a 'Shopping for Justice' day." He was unclear about what he expected people to buy, however, and in an elevator, after the taping, he turned to Jackson and said, "The next step? We don't know what it is. I'm just talking something about this 'holiday thing' for now." Jackson waved goodbye—"Al, I'll see ya"—and Sharpton climbed into a car bound for Brooklyn, where he was scheduled to tape an episode of his syndicated cable show, "Sharp Talk." He checked his voice mail. "I'm one of these guys who work eighteen- to twenty-hour days no matter what," he said. "Before this, I was working Chris Rock's mother's case. Before *that*, Michael Richards. This is what I do, all over the country. It's just a matter of focus, but the hours and energy are the same."

Sharpton's phone buzzed every few minutes; he said that he didn't expect it to stop until half past midnight. "I come in this game knowing half the crowd's going to be cheering and the other half jeering," he said. "My job

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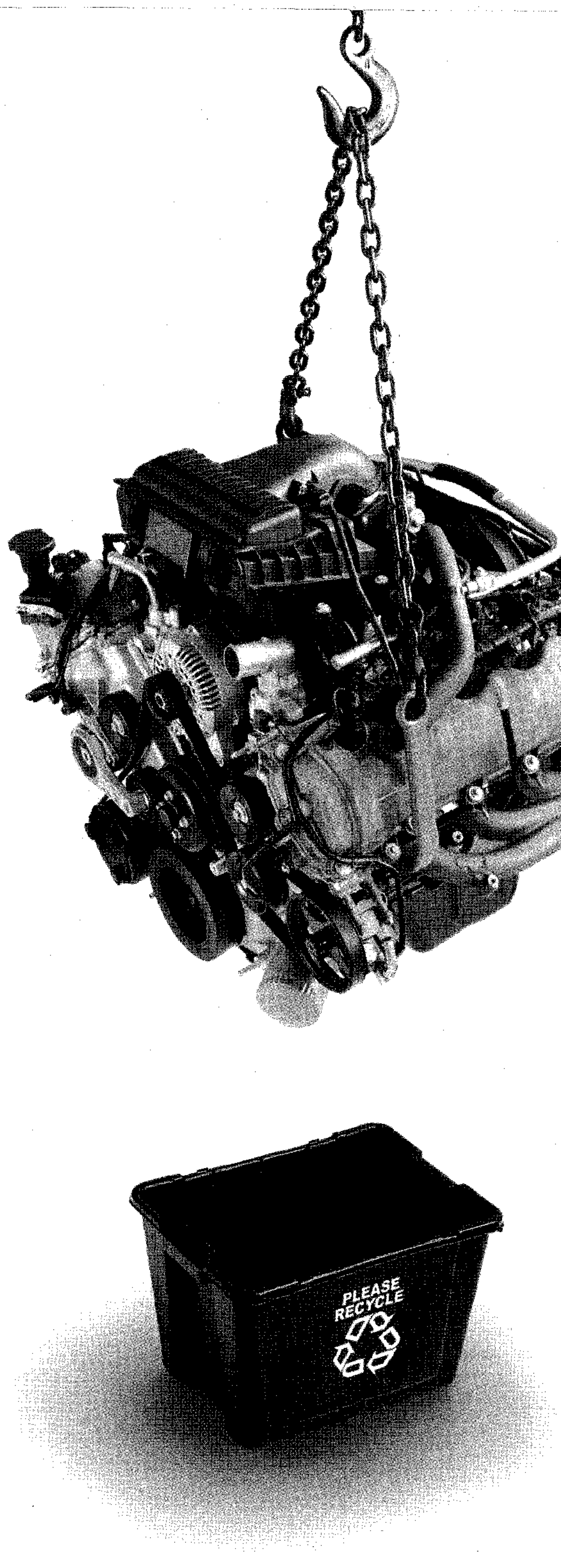

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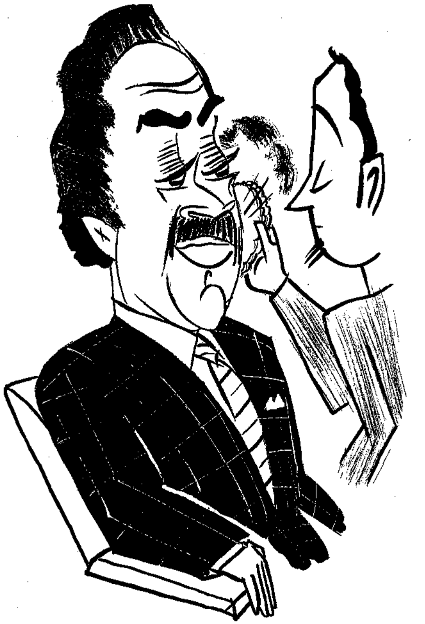
is to get the ball across the goal line."

The car stopped on Flatbush Avenue, behind a parked trailer. "The only time, unfortunately, we've had urban unrest is around police encounters," Sharpton said as he retrieved a briefcase from the trunk. "Watts, South Central: It's always been around police. We've never had a riot—not that I advocate riots at all—around hunger or poverty."

Sharpton entered the trailer and picked at the meagre food offerings—grapes, Oreos, carrots and dip—while looking over the outline for the night's show, the topic of which was "Gun Control in the Black Community." He answered more phone calls ("Guzman is now talking. . . . I don't think we're doing much of nothing tomorrow, but we ought to talk about Friday"), and then went inside to the set—a makeshift barbershop—for the day's second application of makeup.

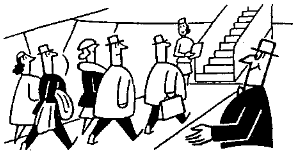
The show began, with the rumbling of the subway shaking the floor. One panelist, an N.R.A. member, said, "If you took all the guns away tomorrow, we'd club each other to death with sticks." Another, a "former thug," according to the outline, said, "I'd rather take a chance with a club." Sharpton laughed, but soon afterward his eyelids began to droop. In the control room, a producer asked someone to fetch the Reverend a cup of coffee.

—*Ben McGrath*



Al Sharpton

HERE TO THERE
JIMMY CARTER ALOFT



Unlike Bill Clinton, a serial moocher of private jets, Jimmy Carter flies commercial. He shambles through airports, towing a wheelie bag. He and his retinue of Secret Service men bypass security, board the plane before the other passengers, and procure the first few rows. Prior to departure, he takes a window seat, in order to insulate himself from his fellow-travellers as they step onto the plane and glance at him with tight smiles that seem to indicate pride not only in their sudden proximity to an ex-President but also in their ability to refrain from making a fuss. Then, after the plane's door has shut, he stands up and walks aft, shaking hands, posing for pictures, learning all the children's names. "It saves me a lot of headaches," he explained last week. "It saves me from having them come up to see me during the flight." (It's hard, but fun, to imagine Keith Richards doing this.) Carter returns to his row and takes an aisle seat—"Rosalynn likes the window"—and the plane leaves the gate.

So it went, anyway, on the eight-thirty Delta shuttle from New York to Washington last Tuesday morning, on the second day of Carter's latest book tour. The book, his twenty-first, is "Palestine Peace Not Apartheid," a provocation that had him parsing words, especially that last one, all week: "I'm not alleging racism, and I'm not referring to Israel. I'm talking about Palestine." It is his contention that the situation in the Occupied Territories "is not debated or acknowledged or even known in this country," and that the "tremendous aversion" here to criticism of Israel's policies has contributed to the disintegration of the peace process. "I can't imagine a Presidential candidate saying, 'I'm going to take a balanced position toward the Israelis and the Palestinians,' and getting elected," he said. "It's inconceivable. AIPAC is smart enough to penetrate any sort of circumlocutions."

Carter, who is eighty-two, was coming off a full day of interviews in New York (Rose, King, Gross) and embarking on another (Russert, Blitzer, Lehrer), but his zest for trumpeting his ideas and accomplishments seemed undiminished. He wore a checked jacket, gray flannels, and brown Kiltie loafers. Jonathan Demme, meanwhile, was shooting a documentary about him, to be called "He Comes in Peace." Demme and his crew sat across the aisle, cameras rolling. They had even filmed him swimming that morning, in the pool at the Peninsula hotel. ("I do a variety of strokes," Carter said, and it was a pleasure to hear him—an Annapolis man—use the term "Australian crawl.")

Carter has evolved into a professional writer. "Most of my income comes from writing," he said. He writes when he's at home, in Plains, Georgia. "I'm a farmer still: I get up at five o'clock. I will write until I get tired, until ten or eleven o'clock. Then I have a woodshop twenty feet away, and I go there and I build furniture, and I paint."

The plane had been delayed by an hour. When it took off, Carter reached across and lowered the window shade. He kept talking, over the announcements from the flight deck, about the privations of the Palestinians, each grim factual citation made in a clipped but doleful manner that he has perfected over the years. (It is the antidote to his famous grin, which is now deployed in rare instances of mirthful circumspection, such as when he is asked why it might be that, as he put it, "you won't read any of this stuff in the New York *Times*." Cue smile: "I need to ask *you* that.") As he lamented the West Bank wall, he drew a map of it on the cover of an in-flight magazine.

Each passenger got a bagel in a brown paper bag. Carter tore his bag along the seams and placed it on his tray table as a kind of plate. It took him nearly the duration of the flight to consume half his bagel: he had a lot to say. He talked a little about the Iraq Study Group. He said that James Baker had asked him to testify before the group, but that he had declined. "I've been so adamantly opposed to the war, since before it started, that there's nothing I could really add." Still, he said, "I think it's unquestionable—and I know how Baker feels, but I'm not going to say how he feels—that one of the main obstacles to any progress in Iraq is the lack of any progress in Palestine."

Demme, across the aisle, motioned

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for Carter to raise the window shade. *Shwip:* there it was, the nation's capital, framed perfectly below. Carter leaned over to look. "Isn't it beautiful?" he said. "I used to live down there."

—*Nick Paumgarten*

THE BOARDS
ONLY A DAY AWAY

Maybe far away, or maybe real nearby, there are girls who still love "Annie." On a Sunday morning earlier this year, twenty-four such girls assembled at a rehearsal studio in Chelsea to audition for the thirtieth-anniversary tour of the show, which opens this week at Madison Square Garden. Before they belted a single note of "Tomorrow," the girls—between the ages of six and thirteen, several wearing clothes on which the word "dance" was sewn in sequins—took off their shoes, formed a line, and waited to be measured. The height limit was four feet ten inches.

"I want a teeny one. I've got to have a teeny one," said Martin Charnin, who was sitting in a room across the hall. Charnin, who is seventy-two years old, wrote the lyrics to "Annie" and has directed nineteen productions, from the original Broadway show in 1977 to the current tour. Though Charnin has presided over hundreds of "Annie" auditions, he seemed taken aback when a casting director brought in the first group of six girls, pointed at one, and whispered, "She had an emergency appendectomy the other night."

"What doctor do you go to, Dr. Feelgood?" Charnin asked the girl, Nikki Testa, who was nine, and had been appendix-free for less than seventy-two hours. "Is the mother here?" he asked.

Nikki's mother, her husband, and Nikki had flown in from Las Vegas—Delta had given Nikki a full row on the plane. The mother assured Charnin that the danger had passed. "There's nothing in there," she explained.

The twenty-four hopefuls had been winnowed down from more than six hundred. In 1978, Charnin recalled, "we had twenty-two hundred kids at the Alvin Theatre—police on horseback showed up." The atmosphere was more subdued in Chelsea: out in the orphan "holding room," one girl read a library book about a princess, another played with an electronic organizer, and a third leaned toward her mother for a strengthening spritz of hair spray. The fixative was applied in vain; Charnin wanted the girls to look tough and messy. He instructed them to remove all hair accessories—headbands, scrunchies, barrettes—and deposit them in a pile.

Periodically, Charnin drew a purple comb through his own long, silver hair. He was wearing faded jeans, a matching denim jacket, and bright-white sneakers. On a table in front of him was his cell phone, which had a mint-green skin patterned like a hundred-dollar bill.

It was time for "Tomorrow." "Don't die on that last note," Charnin instructed the girls.

He didn't seem satisfied with the performance. "They're not mutts," he said, after a group of particularly winsome girls exited the room. He and his staff riffled through a pile of head shots. "She looks like a character from a Tim Burton movie," the music director said of one.

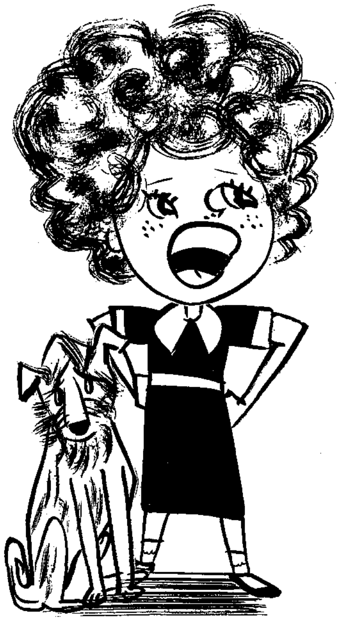
After a break for lunch—Subway for the girls, Samurai Sam's Teriyaki Grill for Charnin—five young actresses read for the part of Annie. A Westchester girl named Marissa O'Donnell has performed the role since the tour opened in the summer of 2005; Charnin was looking for two understudies. On a list of names, he made cryptic notes. There were dots, dots with circles around them, pinpricks, black boxes, rectangles, and arrows.

"It's an embarrassment of riches," Charnin marvelled. "In 1977, only one kid could hit that note at the end of 'Tomorrow,'" he said. "Andrea McArdle." Now they all could do it, which suggested to Charnin that "Annie" has changed the way little girls sing. "It's a phenomenal sociological fact," he said. (Among Charnin's "Annie" progeny are Sarah Jessica Parker, Molly Ringwald, Alyssa Milano, and Catherine Zeta-Jones.)

The day was winding down. "You're getting that glazed 'Tomorrow' piano-player look," the music director remarked to the accompanist. The girls assembled in front of Charnin one last time. "Pretend I'm Miss Hannigan," he directed. "Hate me a lot." When the girls had sung "It's a Hard-Knock Life," Charnin said, "Children, wait outside." He leaned across the table, picking up a stack of head shots. He made an A list and a B list. Another shuffle, and the picks were final; calls would be made later in the week.

The mothers got the news first. "My mom pulled out a bottle of Dr Pepper to tell me," Madison Zavitz, who is eleven, said over the telephone. "She was, like, 'You're Pepper!'" (Pepper is the bossiest orphan.) When Madison returns to New York this week from Orlando, she is looking forward to casually saying, "Oh, wait—this is *my* Square Garden."

—*Susan Burton*



Marissa O'Donnell as Annie

POSTSCRIPT
SWIFT

George W. S. Trow, whose utterly original voice and astringent sensibility were defining features of *The New Yorker* for three decades, died at the end of November, in Naples, Italy, a city that had been his home for the past five years. He was sixty-three.

From adolescence on, George William Swift Trow was a cult figure of sorts, whose fame, though for a time considerable, was a lagging indicator of his influence, which made itself felt through his personal and literary impact on other writers and on certain institutions, notably but not exclusively this magazine. He was an essayist, aphorist, journalist, satirist, and analyst

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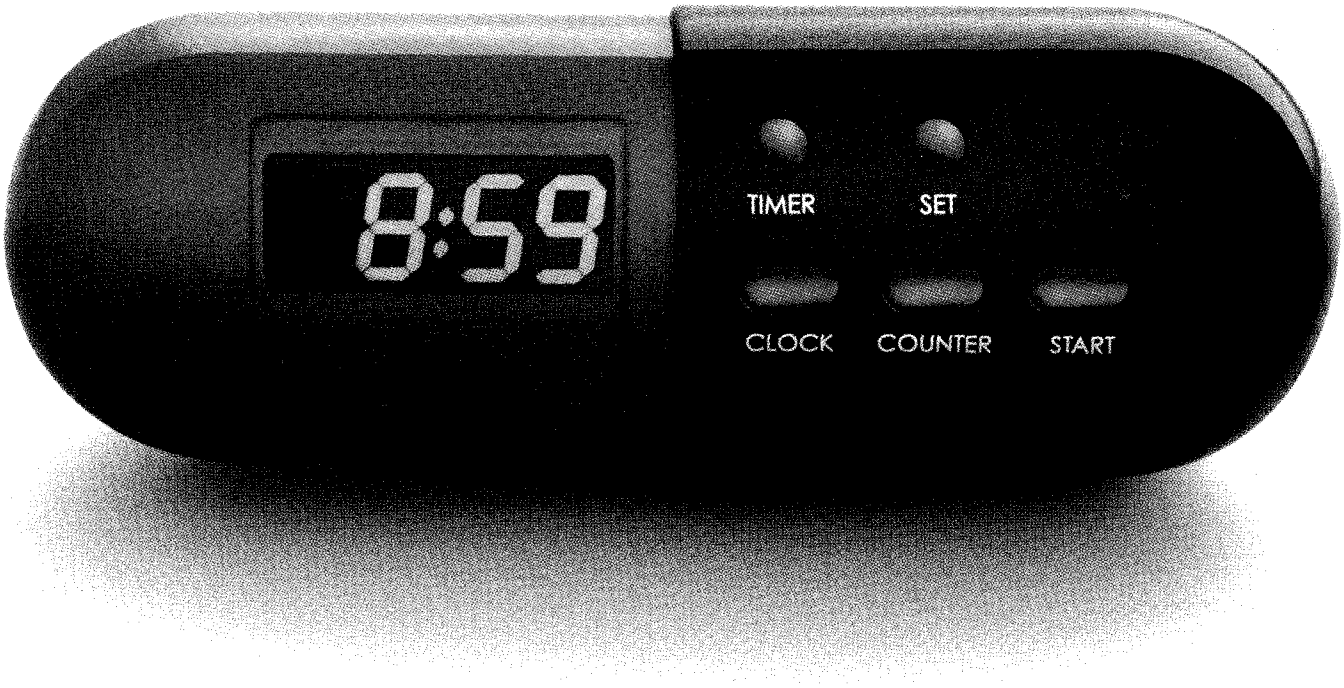

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(and annalist) of what he once labelled, with characteristically arch capitalization, Mainstream American Cultural Artifacts. As one of the fathers of the school of furiously iconoclastic humor that continues to dominate American comedy, and as a screenwriter and playwright, he was also a creator of such Artifacts.

George (whose family name rhymes with "grow") was a child both of the Wasp ascendancy, then on the cusp of its decline, and of the mass media, print division, then at its apex. These two aspects of his background contributed mightily to his work, both in its subject matter and in what he has described as its "feelings—or qualities" of "entitlement on the one hand and feverishness on the other." His great-great-grandfather John Fowler Trow was a prominent New York printer, whose Trow City Directory was the precursor of the telephone book; his father, George Swift Trow, was the night city editor of the *Post*, though the family's style, unlike the tabloid's, was that of the brownstone élite. At Exeter, George learned to defend himself (and his friends, such as Bobby Wagner, the son of the mayor of New York) with a wit that could approach lethality when fully deployed. At Harvard, he wrote the 1964 "Hasty Pudding Show" (with his friend Timothy Mayer) and was president of the *Lampoon*, the clubby humor magazine housed in a comic castle built by William Randolph Hearst, class of 1885.

In 1966, after a stint on active duty in the Coast Guard, George joined *The New Yorker*. His impact on the magazine was as noticeable as it was, at first, anonymous. His unsigned Talk of the Town stories—chronicling popular music, the remnants of Edith Wharton-era "society," Harlem flash, and the new culture of marketing and strobelike celebrity—broke the mold of fusty "visits" and facty catalogues. The pieces were jazzy, telegraphic, *emphatic*. They, and he, inspired a cohort of young colleagues, among them Anthony Hiss, Jacob Brackman, Mark Singer, Alec Wilkinson, Veronica Geng, Alison Rose, and, especially, Ian Frazier and Jamaica Kincaid. "All sentences, all paragraphs about this part of my life, my life as a writer, must begin with George Trow" is how Kincaid begins the introduction to a collection of her own Talk stories. Having been doted on in childhood by female relatives, whose voices he often channelled in conversation, George formed strong friendships with women who had what he called "interesting syntax," including, besides Kincaid, Geng, and Rose, Jacqueline Onassis and Diana Vreeland, the editor of *Vogue*.

In 1970, George helped found the *National Lampoon*. Though he kept his *New Yorker* job, he was nearly as important to the new magazine's early success as were his college chums Henry Beard and Douglas Kenney and his screenwriting partner Michael O'Donoghue. *NatLamp* begat "Animal House" and its many successor films, and "Saturday Night Live" and its many offspring, but George did not follow that route. Instead, he came into his own at *The New Yorker* with a torrent of signed reporting pieces, essays, and casuals. A two-part Profile of Ahmet Ertegun, the head of Atlantic Records, appeared in 1978 and established George as a cultural critic of the first rank. Themes he had been developing all along—the decline of adulthood, the eclipse of cultural solidity (and stolidity), the loneliness of a common life defined by television—burst into full theoretical flower in 1980, with his best-known work, "Within the Context of No-Context." This long essay, edited by William Shawn, was as idiosyncratic as anything this magazine or any other has ever published. Its frame was set out in one of the subtitled snippets from which it was collaged:

> MEMBERSHIP
> The middle distance fell away, so the grids (from small to large) that had supported the middle distance fell into disuse and ceased to be understandable. Two grids remained. The grid of the two hundred million and the grid of intimacy. Everything else fell into disuse. There was a national life—a *shimmer* of national life—and intimate life. The distance between these two grids was very great. The distance was very frightening. People did not want to measure it.

"Within the Context" was brilliant, exhilarating, and vexing. It remains a touchstone for a passionate band of admirers. "I memorized sentences from it," Ian Frazier says. "I used to scare people with them."

Unsympathetic to the changes in *The New Yorker* of the nineteen-nineties, George left the staff in 1994, though he continued to contribute; his last piece appeared in 1999. (Samples of his work are posted at newyorker.com.) Three of his plays were produced, as were two of his screenplays: "Savages," written with O'Donoghue and directed by James Ivory, and "The Proprietor," written with Jean-Marie Besset and directed by Ismail Merchant. George was the author of a story collection, "Bullies"; a novel, "The City in the Mist"; and several works of nonfiction, including "My Pilgrim's Progress: Media Studies, 1950-1998" and "The Harvard Black Rock Forest." "Within the Context of No-Context," with a new introductory essay, was republished in 1997.

As a young man, George was slender, blond, boyish, and elegantly, knowledgeably dressed. With dinner clothes, he wore beribboned dancing pumps, which he said were the only article of men's clothing that remained unchanged since the eighteenth century. In middle age, he wore jeans and a watch cap, and resembled a merchant seaman. Always he was mercurial, playfully talkative, and edgily, dangerously witty. His final years were difficult. Some of his closest friends—Kenney, Mayer, O'Donoghue, Wagner—predeceased him. He abandoned the house he had designed and built in upstate New York, and wandered in Alaska, Texas, and Newfoundland before finding a tenuous stability in Naples. Poignantly, for one whose life was delineated by intense and, on his part, generous friendships, his last years were shadowed by the loneliness he had written about so acutely. During that time, many of us had only fleeting glimpses: a message on an answering machine, with no return number; a secondhand report of a sighting. "A product consumed by a man alone in a room exists in the grid of one, alone, and in the grid of two hundred million," George wrote in his famous essay. "To the man alone, it is a comfort. But just for a minute." Now the grid is three hundred million, and George left it behind before he left the grid of one, alone; but the memory of him will be a comfort for a long time.

—*Hendrik Hertzberg*

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LETTER FROM MAINE

NEW IN TOWN

The Somalis of Lewiston.

BY WILLIAM FINNEGAN

On a misty autumn morning in south-central Maine, a small group of Somali women—Seynab Ali, Hawa Ibrahim, Habiba Nor—are harvesting organic vegetables in fields near the town of Lewiston. There are orders from a couple of high-end restaurants in Portland: ten pounds of tomatoes, four pounds of kale, five pounds of chilies; green beans, a watermelon, six butternut squash, thirty-five pounds of potatoes. The women wade into the fields, yellow cornstalks rising above their heads. Each has her own plot. Seynab Ali loses a shoe in the mud, and peals of laughter echo to a line of trees in the distance.

Ali emerges, her arms full of produce. She is a short woman with a commanding gaze. She holds up a dark leafy vegetable. Collard greens, she says, through an interpreter. There's a lot of this in Georgia, and African-Americans like it; she learned that in Atlanta, where she spent seven months before moving to Maine, in 2005, with her husband and five children. Another son, who is twenty-two, is in a refugee camp in Kenya. Ali was a subsistence farmer in Somalia before fleeing the civil war that has consumed the country for the past two decades. Like the other women in the fields, she speaks very little English, and is illiterate in her own language.

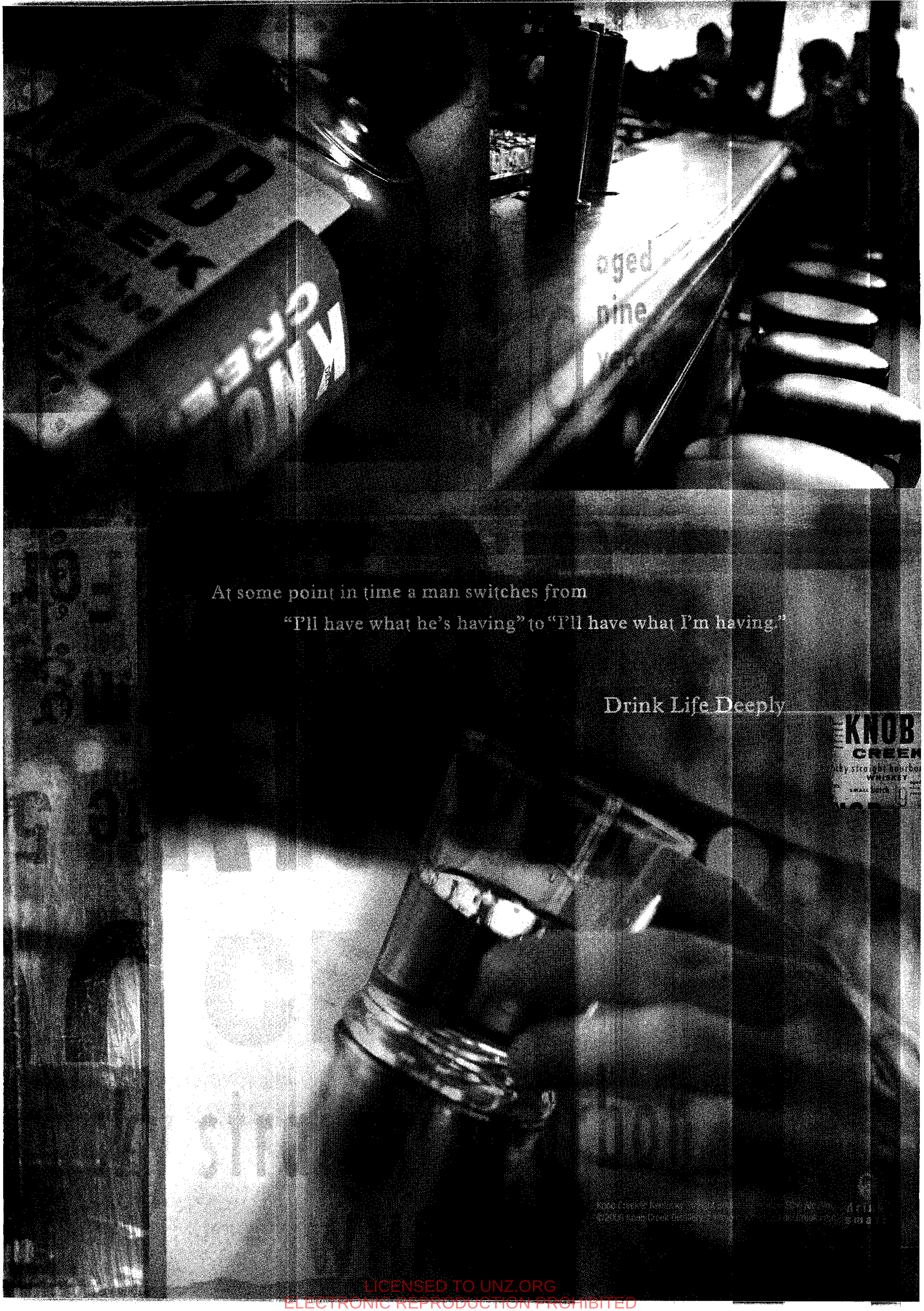
The women come in from their plots, their head scarves gilded by the mist. They carry sacks of carrots and corn for their families, along with the produce ordered by the restaurants. The women also sell vegetables, two afternoons a week, at local farmers' markets. They got their start—leased land, tools, seeds, even a van they take to the fields—from some of the foundations and charities that have taken an interest in the Somali refugees, who started arriving in Lewiston almost six years ago. But their income from farming is minuscule. Ali's husband sometimes works as a janitor in a hotel near the coast; that helps to pay the rent. Their children are in school.

A lanky young American, William Burke, waits at the edge of the field with a scale and a notebook, ready to record the women's contributions. Burke is an AmeriCorps volunteer, working for the New American Sustainable Agriculture Project. As a college student, he cooked with one of the Portland chefs whom he has persuaded to order from the Somali farmers.

I ask Burke if the menus will note that the butternut squash was grown by local Somali refugees.

"We haven't done any real branding yet," he says, his tone finely balanced be-

The Somali refugees' improbable migration has turned into a large-scale social experiment. Photograph by Samantha Appleton.


KNOB CREEK
aged nine years
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“I'm your spirit animal.”

tween earnestness and irony. “That will become more of the project later.”

• •

“Who authorized this?” Lewiston officials say that this is the question they heard most often when the Somalis began showing up in town. The answer was: Nobody did. The Somalis had simply decided to come. Most had been resettled by government agencies in large American cities like Atlanta and Columbus, and were not happy with the crime, drugs, and schools they found there. The first few families had landed in Lewiston in February, 2001, after housing could not be obtained for them in Portland, Maine's largest city. Word quickly went out that Lewiston had good schools, a low crime rate, and cheap housing. By Greyhound bus and minivan, Somali families started arriving, first by the dozens, then by the hundreds.

Lewiston, an old mill town on the Androscoggin River, is known to out-of-staters—if it is known at all—for having hosted, in 1965, in a converted high-school hockey rink, a heavyweight title fight between Sonny Liston and Muhammad Ali. (The bout had the lowest attendance of any title fight ever.) With a population of thirty-six thousand, the town was until recently ninety-six per cent white and predominantly Catholic—French-Canadian and Irish—and was slowly losing its young people as local mills and factories closed. Unlike towns on the Maine coast, it didn't even see tourists. Then, practically overnight, the streets seemed to be full of black African Muslims. Today, there are about three thousand Somalis in Lewiston, and dozens more arrive every month. Before the Somalis arrived, the Lewiston school system employed one teacher of English as a second language. It now employs fifteen, for five hundred students, nearly all of them Somali. At parent-teacher-conference time, the schools hire extra interpreters. An improbable migration has turned into a large-scale social experiment.

The mayor, Laurier Raymond, tried to call the experiment off. In October, 2002, consulting no one, he wrote an open letter to the Somali community, asking people to stop bringing their families and friends to Lewiston. “Our city is maxed out financially, physically, and emotionally,” he wrote. The Mayor was responding, in part, to the complaints of some constituents. Everyone had heard rumors: that the Somalis were getting free cars and vast sums of welfare money and preferment in public housing, and that they would soon bankrupt the town. The rumors were unfounded, but the fear and resentment they signified were real. It was not the best historical moment in which to be a Muslim immigrant in America, particularly not a Somali. There were the September 11th attacks, and then the release of the movie “Black Hawk Down.” One of the American soldiers killed in the battle in Somalia which was depicted in the film had grown up near Lewiston, and images of his corpse being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu had been broadcast worldwide.

The Mayor's letter became a national news story, especially after a white-supremacist organization, the World Church of the Creator, based in Illinois, announced a rally in Lewiston to repel “the Somali invasion.” The Lewiston Somalis were baffled and scared. An anti-racist counter-demonstration was quickly arranged. In January, 2003, state officials, including the governor and the attorney general, addressed a passionate rally at Bates College, in Lewiston, that drew forty-five hundred people. Meanwhile, across town, the neo-Nazis drew a crowd generously estimated at thirty-two, most of them out-of-staters. The white supremacists have not been heard from since, at least not formally. Mayor Raymond retired, and Lewiston got on with its experiment.

On Lisbon Street, the main downtown thoroughfare in Lewiston, many of the buildings are shuttered. The old red brick factories that still line the riverfront, and that used to disgorge thousands of workers at shift changes, are now crumbling hulks. Old neighborhoods of three- and four-story apartment buildings, all within walking distance of the mills, are now inhabited largely by Somalis. In the park next to City Hall, Somali boys on bicycles tear around a Civil War monument, while Somali women, dressed in full-length flowing *jalabib*, babies strapped to their backs, walk slowly, in groups of two or three. Several Somali shops—the Mogadishu Store, the African Multipurpose Store—have opened on Lisbon Street.

But this, in a sense, is all that many of Lewiston's longtime residents see of Somali life. Even though hundreds of Somalis are enrolled in English classes at the Adult Learning Center on the edge of downtown, relatively few speak enough yet to hold a real conversation, or to explain why they're here.

Omar Ahmed, a tweedy, genial man in his fifties with a scholarly-looking beard, speaks English well, and is a welfare case manager for the city. He had an idea about how to break through to the Americans: he would write a play—in Mogadishu, he had been a teacher and a playwright. In 2003, a Lewiston theatre company agreed to produce his latest work, called "Love in Cactus Village," which Ahmed had translated into English. It was the story of a rural Somali girl who defies her father's wish that she marry a rich man. Ahmed described the play to a local reporter as his way of thanking his new neighbors for their hospitality toward him and his fellow-Somalis.

Ahmed had other motives as well. "I wanted to convince the local people that we come from somewhere, that we had universities, that we don't just come from the bush," he told me. "We have such a rich literature, which has survived from our oral traditions. It's so important not to lose our culture. Only a very minute amount of our literature was written down, and even that portion was destroyed in the war. Even our national museum was destroyed, and wild plants are growing there. You can go see."

Ahmed's play was well received by Lewistonians but the local Somalis found it controversial. Even though most of the roles were played by Somali students from Lewiston High, few Somalis attended the performances. And their absence revealed at least as much about the Lewiston Somalis as anything shown onstage did.

"There were so many different objections," Ahmed told me. "People said, 'They will see us as camel riders, camel herders.' But it's *true*—we have a feeling for animals." The imam of the local mosque demanded that the town ban the play, because it had men and women performing on the same stage. Theatre itself is *haram*—forbidden—according to a certain interpretation of the Koran. "These people are saying, 'We cannot have theatre,'" Ahmed said, in exasperation. "I say, 'How can we live?' Other Muslim countries—Indonesia, Egypt, even Saudi Arabia—they have theatre."

Other denunciations of Ahmed's play may have had little to do with piety or propriety. People are loath to talk, at least to outsiders, about the clan system in Somalia, whose rivalries have helped fuel the civil war there. But it survives in the diaspora, and it continues to divide expatriate communities, where different groups scramble for access to resources. (A young Somali social worker told me that he'd stopped going to the Lewiston mosque, because it was dominated by members of the Ogaden clan. "I refuse to pray next to someone who sees me first as an Isaaq, not as a Muslim," he said.) Omar Ahmed's job as a welfare case manager had been widely coveted among English-speaking Somalis, and some of the disappointed candidates, particularly those who happened to be members of other clans, were perhaps nursing a grudge.

Lewiston officials, though taken aback by the intensity of the protests, remained enthusiastic backers of the production. After all the bad feeling over the Mayor's letter and the visit by the neo-Nazis, they saw Ahmed's play as a step in the right, pluralist direction. But notice had been served: Somali "unity," much proclaimed by self-appointed community spokespersons, was an illusion.

Mainers are known, traditionally, for their self-reliance and insularity. Anyone whose grandparents weren't born in the state is an outsider, "from away." But migrant workers have been a pillar of Maine's economy for many years: Jamaicans and Haitians pick apples, Mexicans pick blueberries and keep the fish-processing factories in business; Guatemalans and Hondurans

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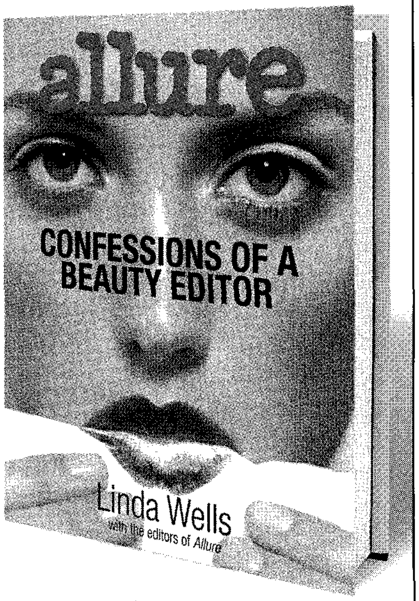

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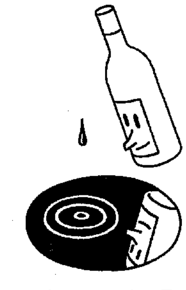
are loggers. Indeed, lobstering is practically the only traditional Maine occupation still performed exclusively by local whites. But the other racial and ethnic minorities mostly depart at the end of the season, leaving Maine the whitest state in the nation. The Somali refugees can't go home.

Nearly every Somali family in Lewiston has survived terrible things. Of an estimated prewar population of nine million, at least a million people are believed to have fled the country. More than a million are believed to have died in fighting and famines since 1991. A recent survey of Somali patients at Portland's Maine Medical Center concluded, "The prevalence of trauma in this population was 100%." The "trauma events" listed in the Portland study ranged from rape and torture to enduring sniper fire and witnessing killing. It found "considerable psychiatric symptomatology." Yet there was no interest in Western psychiatry: distraught Somalis traditionally take their troubles to the imam at their mosque, and they continue to do so in Maine.

Most diaspora Somalis are in constant touch with people back home, by telephone and e-mail and much needed *hawala* (money transfers), and they follow events there closely. The big news recently has been the growth of the Islamic Courts Union, an Islamist movement that originated in Mogadishu's neighborhood Sharia courts, which had emerged to fill the vacuum left by the state's collapse, sixteen years ago, after the overthrow of the longtime dictator, Siad Barre. The I.C.U. amassed a formidable militia and last summer won control of Mogadishu from several contending clan warlords (some of whom the C.I.A. had backed, disastrously, on the ground that they were "antiterrorist"). The I.C.U. has since gained control over most of the country. According to American intelligence, the I.C.U. is providing a haven for Al Qaeda.



In Maine, the first Somalis I asked about the I.C.U. were enthusiastic about its achievements—reducing crime, opening Mogadishu's port for the first time in years, encouraging foreign investment. But one man, a former teacher, sitting in a fast-food restaurant in Lewiston and listening to a friend extoll the new rule of law, smiled sadly and interjected, "Do you think they will give back our houses in Mogadishu if we go and ask?" His friend fell silent. Many Somalis are skeptical of the idea that the I.C.U., because it is Islamist, is pan-Somalian. The movement, they say, is strongly associated with the Hawiye, a major clan. And the repercussions of the fighting, which has been intense recently, and may soon explode into regional war—Ethiopia and Eritrea are backing opposing factions—are felt directly inside the refugee community. In one case I heard about, the Lewiston relatives of a man who had been killed by the Islamists learned that one of the killers was now living in the United States.

Forgetting the civil war got more complicated for many people in Lewiston after the Somali Bantus started showing up, two years ago. Somalia, for all its clan strife, has often been cited as an example of one of the few relatively homogeneous nation-states to emerge in Africa from the colonial period. Everybody spoke the same language, and shared the same ethnicity, culture, and religion. The Bantus were the principal exception. They were the descendants of slaves brought to southern Somalia from farther down the East African coast, and they are, on average, more "African-looking" than ethnic Somalis, who have thinner features and straighter hair. Emerging from chattel slavery in the early twentieth century, most Bantus became subsistence farmers in two river valleys in the south. (Seynab Ali and the other organic farmers are Bantus.) They speak a local language known as Af-Maay-Maay, and have developed their own exuberant form of Islam. Second-class citizens in every sense, they were not provided with schools, health care, or other services, and remained largely preliterate.

When civil war broke out, the Bantus had no weapons, no mobility, and no protection—but they did have food. They were robbed, raped, and murdered en masse. Those who fled languished in refugee camps for a decade or more. In 2003, the United States began to admit twelve thousand Somali Bantus as refugees. Most were resettled in major cities and some started searching for a place that seemed more hospitable. For many Bantu families, that turned out to be Lewiston—there are roughly five hundred Bantus in town now—even though the Somalis already there were, at least by extension, the very agents of the catastrophe they were fleeing.

"Here there is a government," Abkow Ahmed, a soft-spoken thirty-five-year-old Somali Bantu, told me. "There are rules and regulations. Everybody has a role. It is safe." Abkow Ahmed spent thirteen years in a camp in Kenya before he and his family arrived in Boston, in early 2005; in December, they moved to Lewiston. He works nights as a production fryer at a plant that makes doughnuts for Dunkin' Donuts shops. Abkow Ahmed told me that the Somalis in Lewiston had welcomed the Bantus and helped them get settled. "We all know what happened in Somalia," he said. "We know who we are. We know who they are. But nobody can do anything to us here."

The smooth surface of relations between Bantus and Somalis in Lewiston began to change last January. On Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, Bates College hosted a panel on "Recent Shifts in Lewiston's Refugee Population," with the participation of four newly arrived Somali Bantus. Catherine Besteman, a professor of anthropology at Colby College, in Waterville, fifty miles north of Lewiston, was invited to make opening remarks. In 1987 and 1988, she and her husband, Jorge Acero, a photographer, had lived in a Somali Bantu village called Banta, in the Middle Jubba Valley, and she wrote a book, published in 1999, called "Unraveling Somalia: Race, Violence, and the Legacy of Slavery." After the dislocations of the war, Besteman spent years trying, unsuccessfully, to track down some of the families she had known in the Middle Jubba. She had since moved on to other topics. When she arrived at Bates, she was introduced to the other panelists, and after a few minutes she found them gaping at her and exclaiming, "Catherine!"

"It was a true goose-bump moment," Elizabeth Eames, the chair of the Anthropology Department at Bates, said.

"Three of them were from Banta," Besteman told me. "They didn't recognize me, because they didn't know I was blond. I always kept my hair tied up there. And I didn't recognize them, be-

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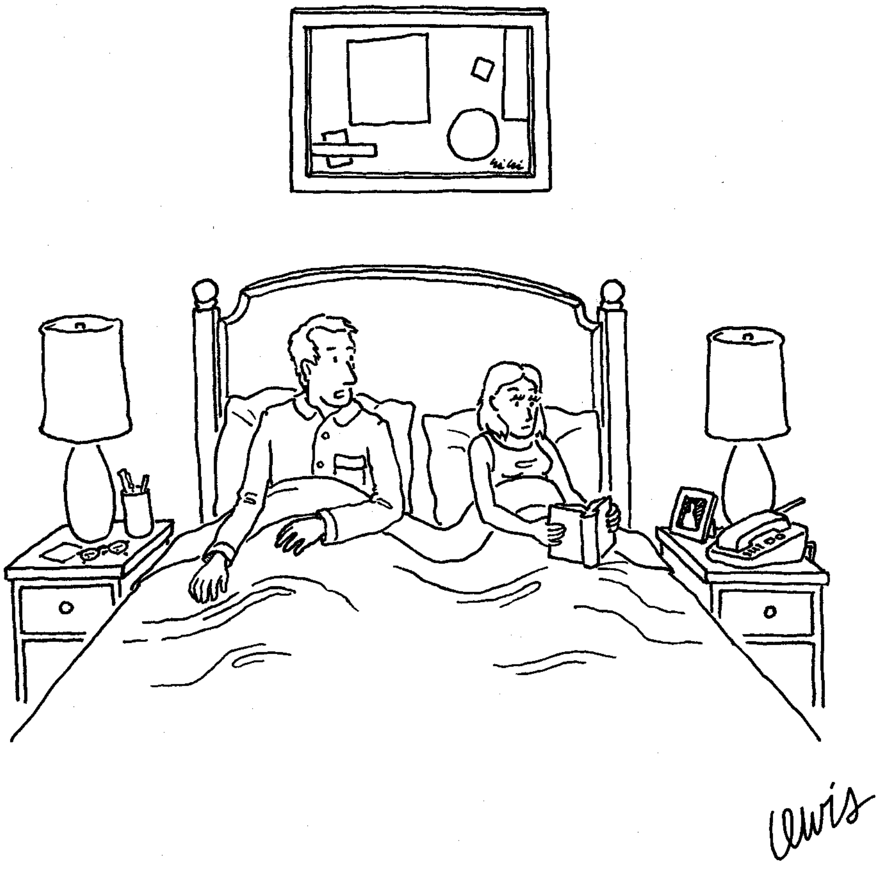
cause they were just the little kids who followed me everywhere, and now they're grown men. But as soon as I said that I'd lived in Banta they said, 'Catherine! We're looking for Catherine!'"

Stunned, she gave her introductory speech. Then each of the men told his story. They were harrowing narratives of cruelty, loss, and escape; two men talked about seeing their fathers murdered. Afterward, Besteman and the Bantu wept together. They made plans for a meeting of the entire Lewiston Bantus community. Besteman and Acero would present a slide show of his photographs from Banta.

"So we did it," Besteman recalled. "Most of those who made it over here were babies then. They never knew their parents. People in the audience were seeing their moms and dads for the first time. It was very, very moving. There were a lot of stories being shouted out about the people in the slides. We had hundreds of pictures, and they made us show them over and over. Even the pictures of the fields, they were just incredibly excited to see. And just incredibly sad. It was everything they had lost. We played tapes of someone's dad reading his poetry. He had never heard his father's voice before." Besteman had conducted a census of Banta in 1988, when the population was five hundred, and now she presented it in the form of a chart of families. "People went crazy over it. They could account for everyone on the chart. This guy was shot in his field by a Somali. This guy was hacked with machetes and died of infected wounds. This woman was taken by militiamen from a fleeing group, right near the Kenyan border, never seen again. Et cetera, et cetera."

Besteman and I were sitting in her office at Colby. She showed me a color photograph of a family group in an African village, with a grinning little girl in the center. "This beautiful little girl lives in Lewiston now, on Bartlett Street," she said. "Married, with five kids. Her family"—Besteman indicated the others in the photograph—"are all dead."

"Catherine's two events were the turning points—the Bantu got more confident from them," Sheikh Mohamed, a twenty-nine-year-old Bantu, told me. (When I asked about his unusual first name, he laughed and said, "I was a beloved child, so my mother called me Sheikh.") Among other things, the Bantus began requesting, in hospitals and public offices, interpreters who spoke Af-Maay-Maay. Previously, he said, many people had pretended to understand the Somali interpreters, because they feared that the interpreters might get angry if they asked for someone else.



"Sometimes I close my eyes and pretend that someone else is denying me sex."

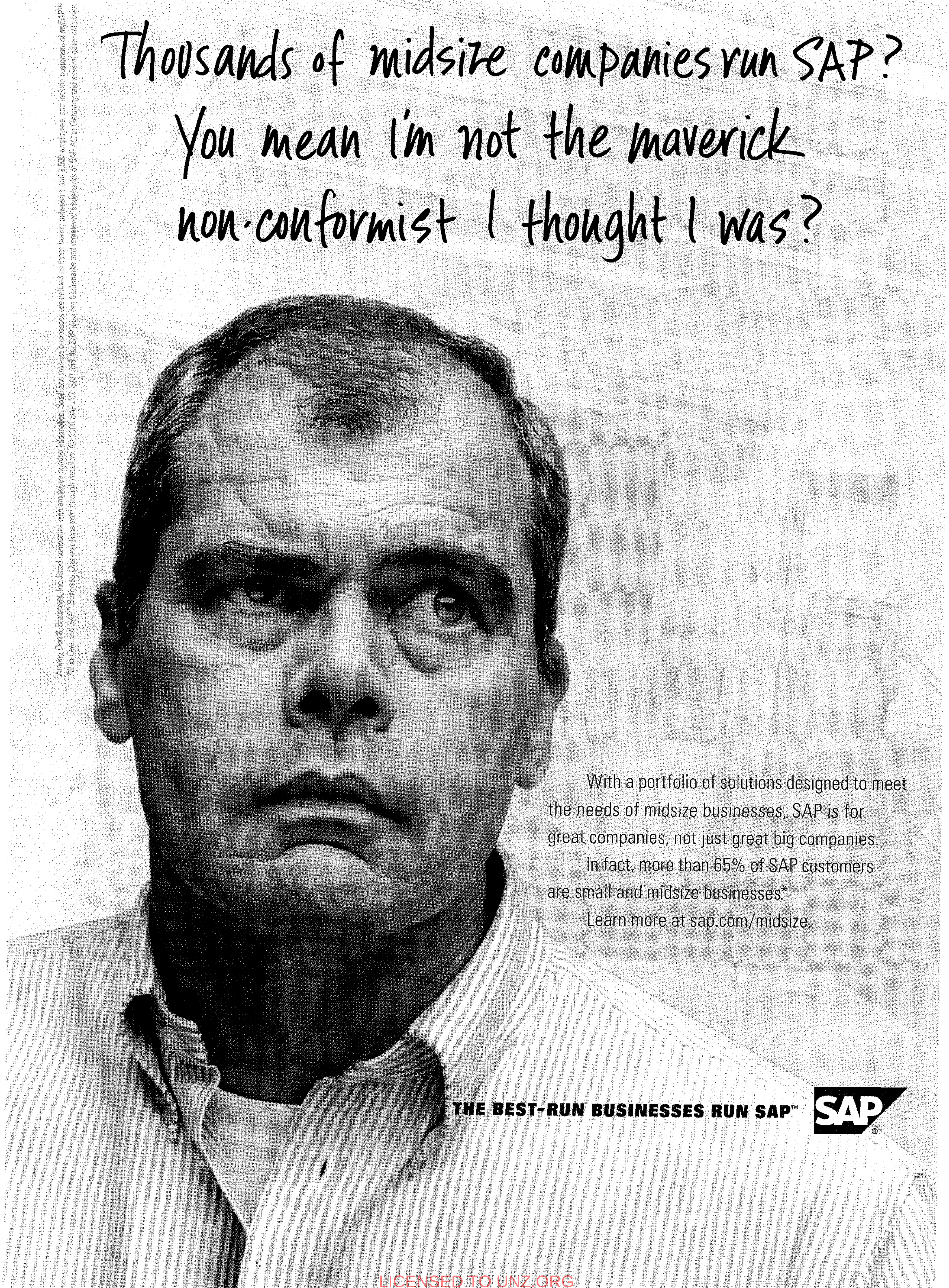
Sheikh Mohamed works as a cashier at Wal-Mart. He is lithe and frank, and his English, which he learned in the camps in Kenya, is good. He did not seem afraid to speak up for himself. But he found the insults and racial slights that the Bantus experienced in Maine—from other Somalis—to be unrelenting. A Bantu friend of his had gone to the Lewiston mosque to pray, "and they told him to come back with six guys to wash the mosque. For free! They still think we work for them!"

One Somali word for a Bantu is *Adoon*, the same as the word for a slave, and Somalis did not hesitate to use it. At school, according to Sheikh Mohamed, Somali kids were even involving unwitting white kids in the abuse: "A Somali boy tells a white child to go say '*Uf!*' to a Bantu child. To us, that means 'You smell bad.' So the Bantu child starts fighting with the white child. But the white child didn't even know what he was saying!" Mohamed described an encounter he had just had with a white child in the public-housing project where he and his family live. "The white child tells me he hates Bantus. I ask him why. He says his Somali friend hates Bantus, and so he does, too."

Seynab Ali and Hawa Ibrahim, the organic farmers, are enrolled in a beginning-English class at the Adult Learning Center. On the afternoon I visited the class, the teacher, Kelley Rudd, was engaging her students in a series of skits. In one, Ali was trying to borrow mangoes from her neighbor, who asked how many she wanted. Ali hesitated, then blurted, "Five dollars!" The class broke up in laughter, and Ali gave me a wry look.

Rudd, who grew up on the northeastern Maine coast, recently spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in rural Turkmenistan, teaching English. Her Turkmen students, she said, were literate in their own language. "Here we're trying to do everything at once," she said. "Speaking, reading, writing, numbers, oral comprehension, plus literacy itself."

Early on, town officials decided that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"You're not so much crying on the inside as severely hemorrhaging."

• •

recipients of general assistance could fulfill Maine's welfare work requirement by taking English-as-a-second-language classes. This has been expensive: federal funds for refugee resettlement do not follow people who pursue "secondary migration"—who move, that is, from the cities where they were first resettled. But the state has begun to help with funding.

Some Somalis have managed to acquire English in Kenyan refugee camps or have middle-class multilingual backgrounds or have already picked up some English in the United States. These students often go into job-training classes with white Americans. But others, particularly the Somali Bantus, have never even held a pen before. There is also the local climate to confront. "In every class with Somalis, we're trying, this time of year, to get them ready for winter," Anne Kemper, who runs the Adult Learning Center, told me. "Talking about snow and ice, how to dress their kids properly for the weather, what a smoke alarm is and what to do if it goes off."

During a break in Rudd's class, I talked to a couple of Bantu men. Our conversation was disrupted, however, by an older, rather imperious Somali woman with a humorless smile, who kept interjecting, "We all Somali. We all same." She wouldn't leave, and the Bantu men withdrew behind polite masks.

I did manage to talk to one young man, an eighteen-year-old Bantu named Osman. He spoke little English, but he made me understand that he had attended high school in Syracuse before moving to Lewiston. He showed me his school I.D.: he had got through two years of American high school with a handful of English words. Refugee children are placed in schools according to their age, not their academic level. Somali parents have been confused by this practice, asking why their illiterate teens are not placed in kindergarten. To an American, the answer—the social dimension—is obvious. But the result is a growing population of alienated, disenchanted Somali youth, unable to compete or succeed.

Unemployment in the Somali community is estimated at fifty per cent. Alex Nicolaou, an employment counsellor for Catholic Charities in Maine, who works mainly with Somalis, told me that in the Lewiston area a number of refugees are employed by the Dunkin' Donuts plant, a printer, and a tampon manufacturer. In Freeport, twenty miles away, L. L. Bean has a giant packing facility that hires many Somalis, particularly during the Christmas season. L. L. Bean's call center, however, like the many telemarketing companies in the area, has few jobs for people with less than standard English.

In some cases, Nicolaou believes, employers use his clients' lack of English as an excuse not to hire them. "If language is a problem, we provide interpreters, free of charge," he said. Many jobs, for that matter, don't require more than a small English vocabulary. But some managers don't bother with excuses. "I have actually had employers say, 'I won't hire black people,'" Nicolaou told me. "Or 'I won't hire Muslims.' I had an H.R. person—this was at a big firm—tell me, 'People need to have been in the country at least one year.' I said, 'That's illegal. Why?' She said, 'Because they might be terrorists. They might plant a bomb or something.'

"A lot of companies have uniform requirements," Nicolaou went on. "No hijab, or it has to be modified. People want to pray five times a day, and employers ask about that. We explain, 'Just give people a place and a few minutes a day.' That is *easily* handled. Really, my clients just want to work."

In July, a local man threw a frozen pig's head into the Lewiston mosque while people were praying. He claimed that it was a harmless prank, but almost no one believed him, and there were calls for a federal hate-crime prosecution. Top state officials, including the governor, came to Lewiston, just as they had during the dueling rallies of 2003. But among the Somalis, Omar Ahmed told me, the current imam "counselled people not to overreact, to show we are good people by being cool." The man was barred from approaching the mosque and faces a variety of criminal charges, but by fall the incident seemed largely forgotten.

The mosque sits behind a scruffy unmarked storefront on Lisbon Street, next to Caveman and Associates Tattoo Studio. Nuh Iman, the imam, is slight, dark-skinned, and full-bearded, and, on the day I met him, he wore a black-and-white-checked shawl and tinted glasses. With a show of reluctance, he took me to a large upstairs room. Persian rugs covered the floor and windows. The room

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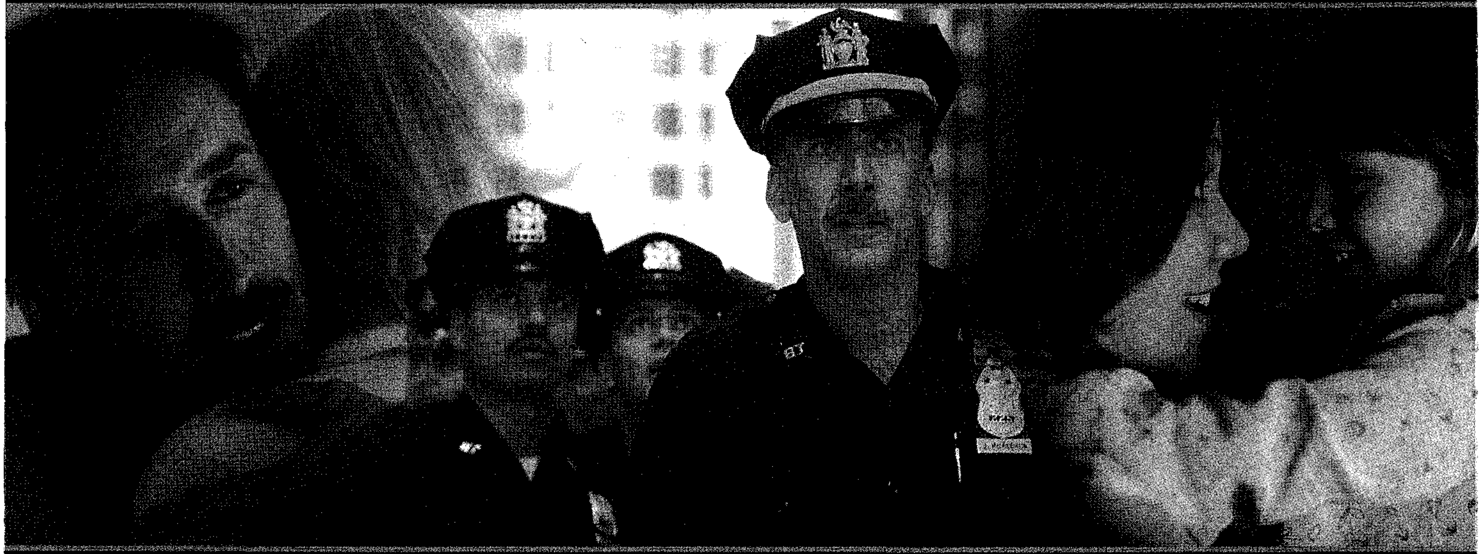

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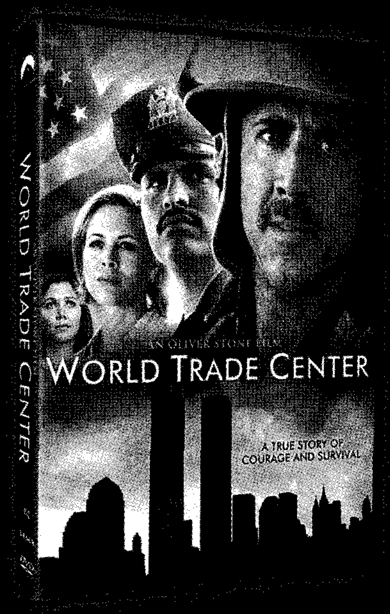
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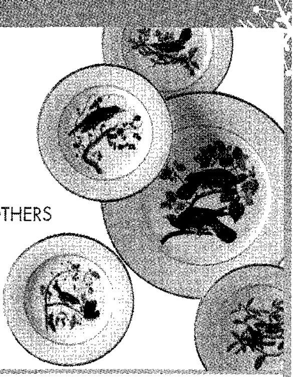

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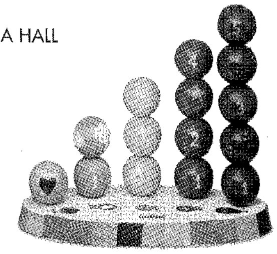

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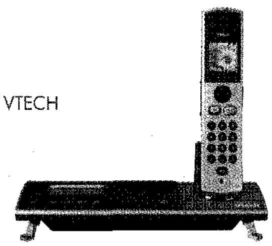

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was a mess, and the building seemed to be falling down around us. "The financial condition of this mosque is very low," he said.

Iman came to the United States in the nineteen-eighties, he said, as part of a military training program. He was then in the Somali Air Force. But things were deteriorating in Somalia, so he stayed. He had come to Lewiston only in 2005, and he planned to return to his home, in northern Virginia, soon. He found life in Lewiston "a bit slow."

I asked him about the Bantus in Lewiston.

"These people are not Bantus," he said. "They just say that so they can get distinction as refugees." He told me (contrary to all historical scholarship) that the people known as Somali Bantus are actually members of minor southern Somali clans, and that the real Bantu "were indigenous people all over Somalia—hunters, like the Indians here, who don't want to settle in cities."

I asked if the Bantus were not, then, the descendants of slaves.

"No, they were not slaves," he said. "Nobody slaved nobody in Somalia."

The imam began to talk about religious doctrine, explaining which local jobs were *haram*. "If you're a drinks waiter, you're poisoning people—that's *haram*. But if you're just clearing dishes it's O.K." He went on, "People in Somalia like plays and concerts. But every concert is no good, especially when they talk about love and sex. You are waking up the population. Big band is not allowed in Islam. The big drum, saxophone, trombone, xylophone—Satan created those things."

Other Somalis in Lewiston take a less puritanical view. The young social worker told me that when Somalis asked him whether it was *haram*, for example, to deliver a pizza with a bacon topping, he told them to worry about keeping their jobs. Still, there has been a distinct shift, in the past few years, among the Lewiston Somalis, toward stricter religious observance. Women who never wore hijab in Somalia—where miniskirts were once popular in the cities—told me that they always do in Maine. Prayers and fasting have, by all accounts, become more common. In part, this revival predates their migration. Fatuma Hussein, a young mother of five, who fled Mogadishu as a teen-ager, recalled that during the civil war "people were saying, 'Why did this happen to us? It must be loose women, and drinking alcohol, and going to cinemas.' Even my mother, who is still in Nairobi, she wears the hijab today." (In contrast, the traditional practice of female-genital mutilation, which is almost universal in Somalia, seems to have been abandoned in Maine.)

For some, religiosity is a reaction to cultural dislocation. One Somali college student I met who wears the hijab—in her case, an ankle-length black tunic, worn over pants, and a scarf, covering everything but her face and hands—told me that she had begun to do so only six years ago. She spoke immaculate Gen Y English and could knowledgeably discuss hip-hop videos one moment and, in the next, citing the Prophet Muhammad, argue that music is *haram*. ("It deadens the heart," she said.) For her, living in a non-Muslim country, she said, "My ethnicity is my anchor."

Fatuma Hussein cast a kind of sidelong light on this issue when she described the shock that she felt on arriving in America. Having escaped the horrors of the civil war and spent years in a refugee camp in Kenya, she was resettled, first, in suburban Atlanta, where she was sent to an all-white high school. "And I tell you," she said, "American high school is the cruellest place I've been."

Omar Ahmed, the playwright, is one of the few Somalis in Lewiston who have been able to get a mortgage and buy a house. "I asked the real-estate guy, 'Who are the neighbors?' He said, 'How should I know? All I know is this house, what's wrong with it, what's good with it. Are you crazy?' I said, 'I need to know who the neighbors are.' He wouldn't help me. So I went next door, knocked on the door, and an old French lady answered. She was scared, hard of hearing, and then her son came, very big, very aggressive. 'What you want?' I told him, 'Don't worry. I am a black man, but I come in peace.' And so they invited me in, and we talked, and we became friends. They told me about the other neighbors. They've helped us so much. I never owned a house in a cold place before. What's a furnace? There is a lot to learn. But this is why we

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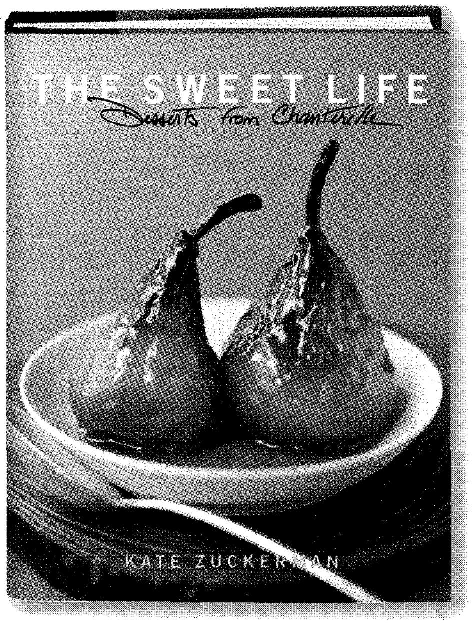
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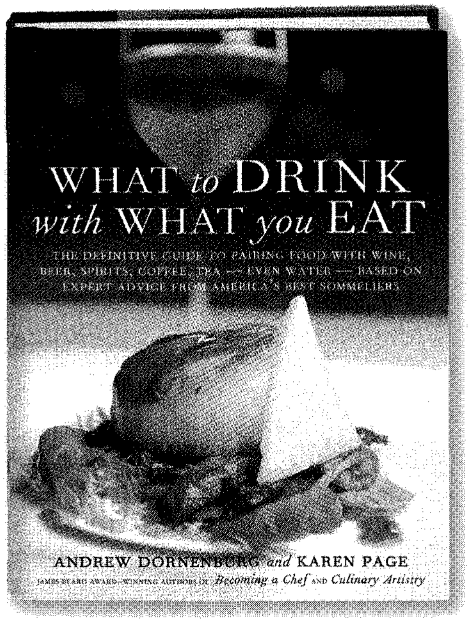
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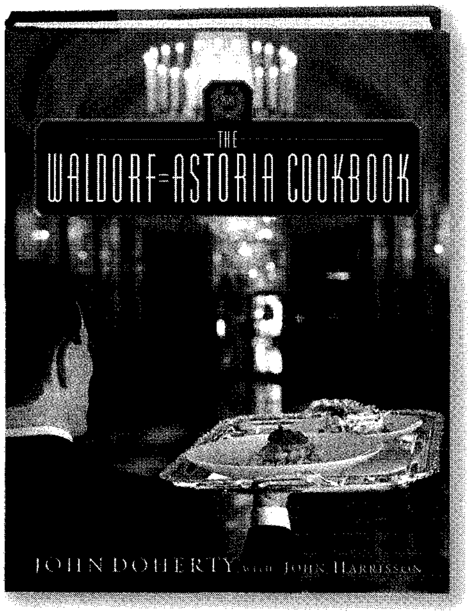
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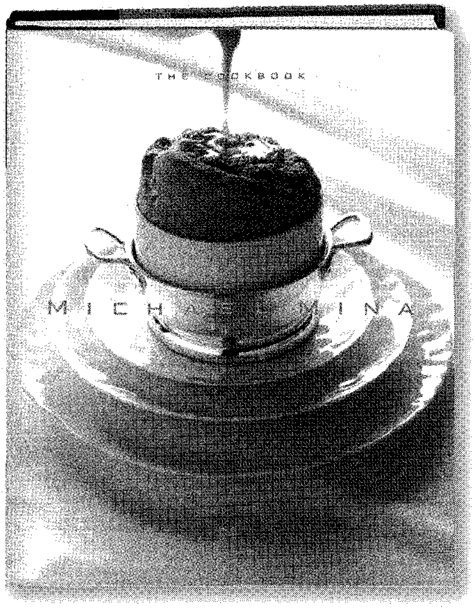
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love Maine so much, because the people are so kind."

We were sitting in the living room, where Ahmed's wife, Barlin, was trying to watch "Enemy of the State," starring Will Smith, on a flat-screen TV. Barlin, who studied economics in Mogadishu, speaks Somali, Arabic, and Italian better than she does English. She now works in the escrow department of a bank in Lewiston. A grown daughter, who is a packer at L. L. Bean, walked in, exhausted, from work.

In Ahmed's job as a welfare case manager, he must inform applicants for general assistance whether they qualify for benefits. "At first, when I had to give a negative answer to Somalis, they all said, 'You're like the whites!' And when I had to give whites a negative decision they said, 'You're against us!' But now I start by explaining the system in detail, the guidelines, before I tell them the decision. Then they understand. And I can give them referrals to other agencies for food, and so on, which makes them happier. There is an answer for everything."

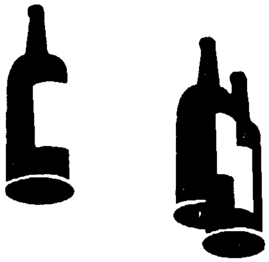
When the Bantus started arriving in Lewiston, Omar Ahmed was one of the first local Somalis they turned to. Since he came from their part of Somalia and knew their culture, he was sympathetic. He became an advocate for them. And, as it happened, he was one of only two non-Bantu Somalis present at the slide show presented by Catherine Besteman. Afterward, however, according to Besteman, Ahmed was distraught. Why had only Bantus been there? Why had the whole community not been invited? Besteman thought the answer was self-evident. But Omar Ahmed couldn't see it. And he is no longer perceived in Lewiston as an advocate for the Bantus.

Sheikh Mohamed, the young Bantu who works at Wal-Mart, calls the Hillview public-housing project, where he lives with his family, "paradise." It's on the eastern edge of Lewiston, out past Insane Car Audio, just under a wooded ridge. In the fall, the trees form a blazing, colorful backdrop for an array of fifteen two-story buildings, containing ninety-four apartments. Somali women chat on cell phones on their front stoops while their toddlers play on the neatly mown grass.

"For a lot of Lewiston Somalis, this is the place," Carla Harris, the manager of resident services for Lewiston's public housing, said. "It's like a village." Seventy per cent of the Hillview population is now Somali. Harris still hears complaints from local whites. "Just the other day, I had somebody tell me, 'I heard you guys get twenty thousand dollars for every Somali family you take in.'" Harris made a rueful face, as if to say, I wish. "But it's gone well. There used to be more of a crime issue here, before the Somalis came. Now there's nothing. The kids are becoming Americanized, but there's still no drinking, no drugs. We see their kids going off to college. They are not going to be second-generation public housing."

A basketball court outside her office was filled with children. Some of the bigger boys, Somalis and a couple of white kids, were playing an intense half-court game. The Somalis had already mastered some advanced moves. Around Lewiston, which is a sports-mad town, the talk these days is about a couple of promising Somali soccer players at Lewiston High. Somali girls are expected to come straight home after classes to help with housework, and most of their parents refuse to allow them to wear American-style athletic outfits. Still, some play on sports teams, in some cases wearing spandex under their hijabs or, for basketball, replacing the head scarf with a bandanna.

Harris showed me the community center at Hillview. "We don't have a Christmas party anymore," she said. "And dogs are really not O.K. A cop brought Sarge, the police dog, around, and the Somali kids were intrigued. But they couldn't come near. We wouldn't do that now." (Many Muslims consider dogs unclean.) She went on, "We've got a lot of good programs for kids. Bates students are a big part of it—they do the tutoring. We've got a marching band. We got a Stephen King grant for band equipment."



RICHARD McGUIRE

I was surprised, knowing how controversial music was among the Somalis.

"Well, we've never had a Somali kid get involved in the music program," Harris said, a bit sheepishly. "Now we're calling it Music Education, saying it's not for fun. We'll see if that flies." (Several Somali children have since signed up.)

I asked about the Somali Bantus. "They seemed behind at first," Harris said. "Their knowledge of indoor plumbing, thermostats—stuff like that—wasn't up to speed. I wasn't sure what was going on between them and the other Somalis. Then I had one of them hang back after a meeting with our translator, and when everybody was gone he said to me, 'We were their slaves.'"

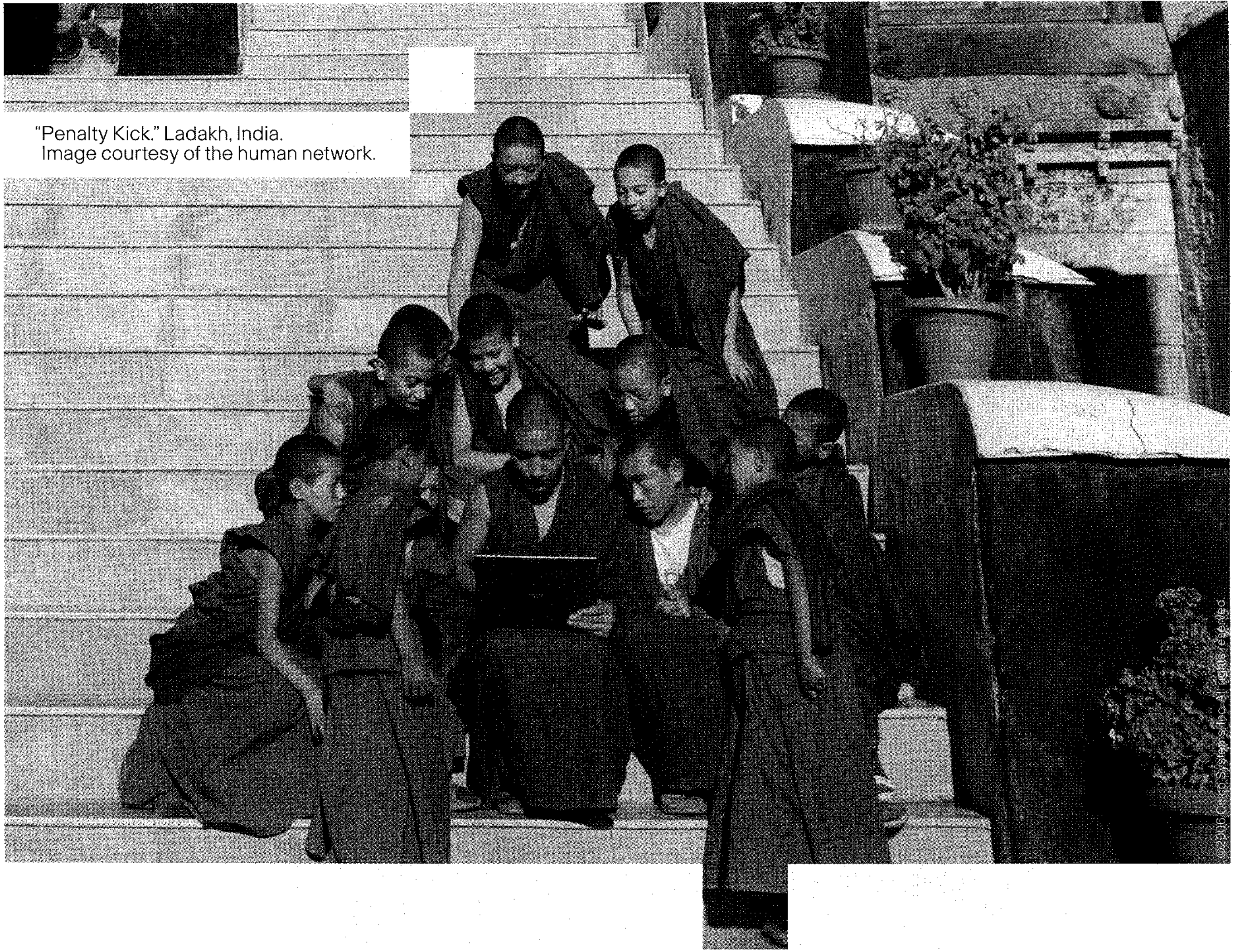
Harris tilted her head, as if recalling a moment of shock. "But it'll be O.K., I think," she said. "They seem to get along."

I went to see Sheikh Mohamed in his Hillview apartment. The rooms were tiny, boxy, with print tapestries on the walls. He was putting on a Wal-Mart smock for his evening shift. During the day, he takes classes at Central Maine Community College, where he is working toward a degree in public health. There was African pop music blasting in the kitchen, and I could see his wife swaying to it as she cooked. I remembered Mohamed saying, of non-Bantu Somalis, "They're not African. They're part Arab. We're pure African." I had come to see an Af-Maay-Maay dictionary—thought to be the first of its kind—that Mohamed and some of his friends were helping to put together. While I leafed through the dictionary—handwritten, very much a work in progress—Mohamed looked out a window.

"Hillview is the safest place I ever saw," he said.

His mother was still in Somalia, farming in the Middle Jubba Valley, where he grew up. Mohamed was worried about her. "It's not peaceful there, and not possible to phone." He and some relatives had fled in 1991, after militias began attacking the Bantus. On the trek to Kenya, they hid in the bush from bandits. Three people in their group died of hunger and thirst.

Mohamed had to leave for work. I asked if his Wal-Mart job was difficult. He paused, gave me a long, slightly embarrassed look, and said, "No." ♦



"Penalty Kick." Ladakh, India.
Image courtesy of the human network.

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SHOUTS & MURMURS

BEYOND BIRD FLU: OTHER POTENTIAL EPIDEMICS

BY FRANK GANNON

INFLUENZA H59, or Excessive Article Disorder. It is believed that this flu is spread by holding small plates of finger food in close proximity to others holding small plates of finger food.

Symptoms: Those with the illness will repeatedly put the article "the" in front of various nouns that, in a sound and healthy environment, do not customarily have the word "the" in front of them. Examples: "the dance," "the novel," "the work," "the film," etc. (Note: Some researchers believe Influenza H59 to be a strain of Influenza T24, which causes Nigel-Clive Syndrome, a diagnosis given to patients who use the phrase "inverted commas" more than once in a seven-day period or who habitually refer to all social gatherings as "drinks parties.")

INFLUENZA M29, often called Omni-"Law & Order" Disorder. This is characterized by the delusion, not always unfounded, that the television show "Law & Order" is being broadcast on every channel, every second of every day. Typically, patients afflicted with the virus firmly believe that every person in the world is watching "Law & Order" and will continue to do so for the rest of their waking lives.

Symptoms: Onset often occurs when the patient has decided to go to bed but "still wants to watch something" before dozing off. The unfortunate sufferer characteristically flips through the channels, and gradually comes to believe, to his or her horror, that the only thing on is the hour-long crime program produced by Dick Wolf, in one manifestation or another ("Law & Order: Rural Free Delivery," "Law & Order: Extra Credit Unit," etc.).

INFLUENZA 529, or Entrenched Ditty Derangement. The infected person displays an inability (in the worst cases, lasting months) to rid his cortex of an unusually repugnant melody. (In some extreme cases, lyrics are part of the malady.)

Symptoms: Early signs include innocuous humming in the workplace. In later stages, the sufferer may believe that he hears voices in his head. A large body of clinical literature exists on the topic (see " 'Horse with No Name' Phenomenon"; "Complications Arising from the Theme to 'Walker, Texas Ranger' "). In one famous case in New Jersey (known in medical circles as Embedded "Jessie's Girl" Phenomenon), manslaughter resulted.

INFLUENZA 546, or Spin Control Syndrome. Doctors do not know how this ailment was introduced to the general population, but four hundred and thirty-three cases have been reported in the past two years.

Symptoms: Infection begins in a barely noticeable way, with increased perkiness, and typically becomes more and more pronounced, as the sufferer makes everything in his or her life sound "just terrific." A typical presentation is that of James S. of Portland, Maine. James, both of whose parents died and who also got divorced in the same year, wrote in his family's annual Christmas letter that his mother and father were "pursuing new interests" and that his wife, Alicia, who left him for a stockbroker, was "as stunning as ever," and that her work was increasingly forcing her to "spend a good deal of time travelling." Their son Alex, convicted of drug and assault charges and serving time in prison, was, according to the letter, "exploring creative opportunities in a structured environment." James S. is receiving treatment, although he likes to say that he is "taking time off to do some writing." ♦

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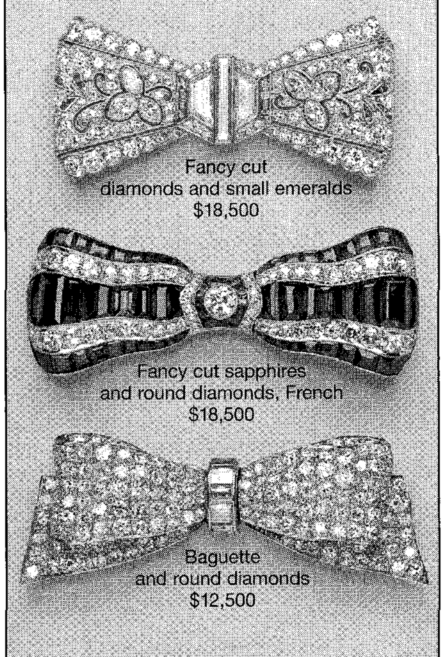
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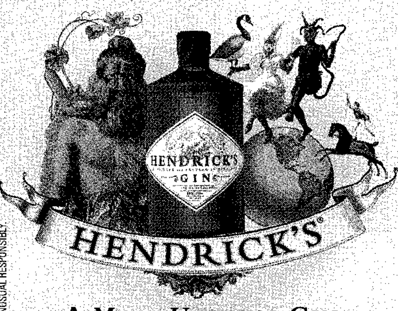

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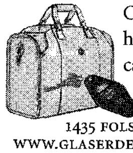
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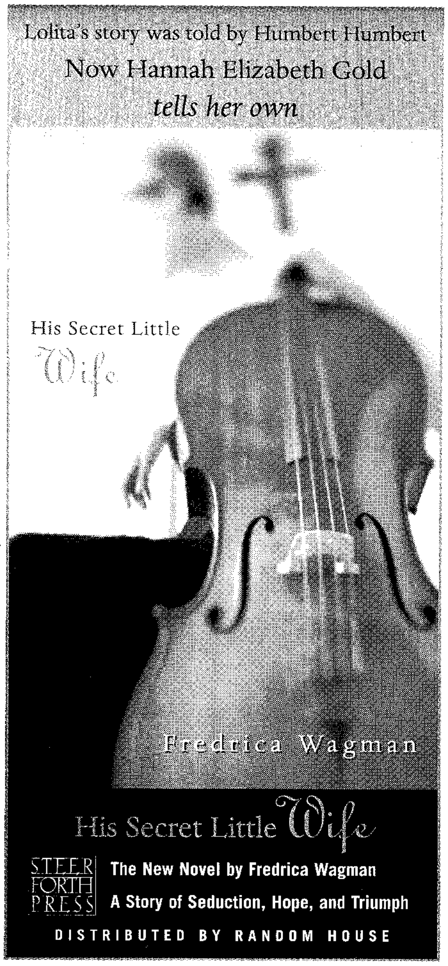
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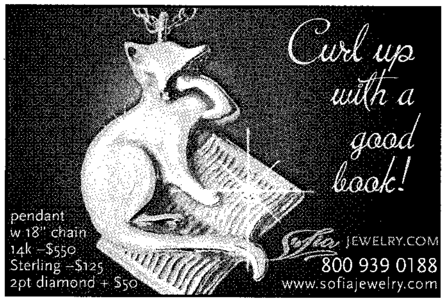
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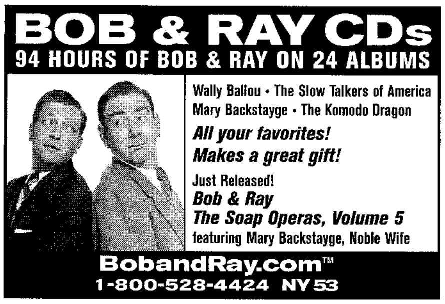
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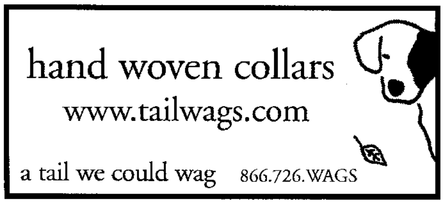
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ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

SANTA SECRETS

What to get your nearest and dearest.

BY PATRICIA MARX

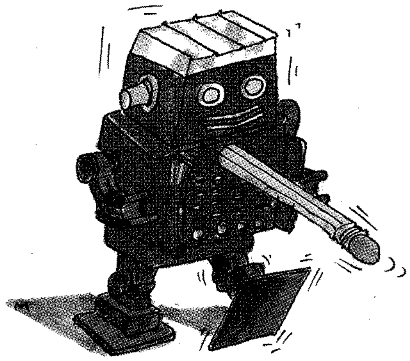
With luck and a fake case of chicken pox, the desperate writer can finesse a deadline extension. For anyone struggling to overcome shopper's block during the holiday season, however, there can be no hope of getting Jesus Christ's birthday postponed. I'm talking to those of you who are now regretting the fact that way back in January you didn't coerce everyone on your Christmas list to sign and have notarized a No Gift Exchange form. You have my sympathy, of course, but that, alas, cannot be wrapped up in a box with exquisite gold paper with felted burgundy filigree from Papyrus (1250 Sixth Avenue, at Rockefeller Center, and other locations; $3.95 a sheet). And so it is time to apply a thick coat of Spazzstick Caffeinated Lip Balm, in vanilla toffee or cool mint (ThinkGeek.com; $2.99), and march yourself into some stores, either real or cyber.

Let's start with your mother. Like all mothers, she is a challenge to shop for, and not because she doesn't want anything. Mothers want everything, but they don't trust you to pick it out. Fathers, on the other hand, want nothing. Children have everything and want more of it. But back to your mother, before she complains about being ignored. Sign her up for a membership to the wonderful Rubin Museum of Art (150 West 17th Street; $55 for an individual membership), then direct her to the gift shop, specializing in Asian decorative arts, where she can select a charming evening purse adorned with coral beads and large turquoise stones ($195), a fearsomely swell woollen rug from Nepal shaped and striped like a tiger ($195), or a package of pink Himalayan salt with a hand-carved wooden measuring spoon ($15.50).

For your father, might I suggest a pair of Bose QuietComfort Acoustic Noise Cancelling Headphones (Bose, 10 Columbus Circle, in the Time Warner Center; $299) and a sleep mask (available at any drugstore or in any airplane first-class cabin)? Don't forget to include a gift card on which you have written, "As close an approximation of *nothing* as there is!"

What all children want the most is what all parents want the least: a dog. "We can't get a dog because Daddy is allergic" is a ploy worth trying, but be prepared to hear, as I did recently, "If Daddy dies, *then* can we get a dog?" As more than one parent has discovered, a betta fish (Pacific Aquarium and Pet, 46 Delancey Street; $3.50 and up), although it does have the advantage of being able to survive in a low-oxygen environment (a.k.a. a bowl), is no dog substitute. Nor is My Little Aquarium, a really cute toy with realistic-looking magnetic swimming fish ($14.95 at S. Feldman Houseware, 1304 Madison Avenue, at 92nd Street). When, inevitably, you succumb to the children's pleading, consider the schnoodle, a new hybrid breed that combines the intellect of a poodle, the devotion and lovability of a schnauzer, and the hypoallergenicity of both (breedersclub.net; about $500).

The "in" toy this season, as you may know, is sold out everywhere. It is Elmo T.M.X., a red stuffed monster that writhes on the floor, convulsing with laughter and begging you to stop tick-

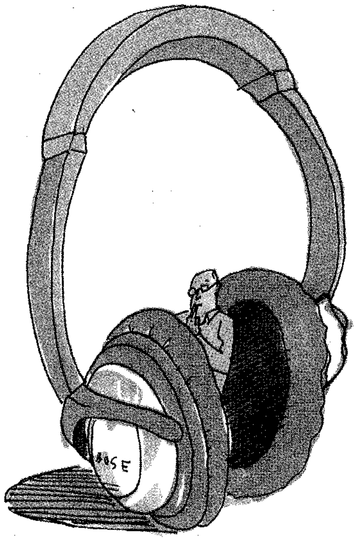

TOYTENT'S WIND-UP ROBOT PENCIL SHARPENER

MICHAEL CRAWFORD

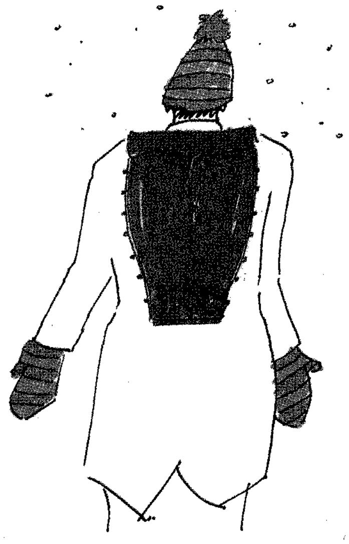
ling it (unavailable for $39.99 wherever toys are sold). You can probably snag one of these furry creatures on eBay, but it may cost you well over a hundred dollars and require sniping the other bidders with three seconds to go. But don't worry; there are less cacophonous playthings out there. A solar-powered rainbow-maker that can fill a room with a rotating swirl of rainbows by refracting light through a Swarovski crystal is utterly silent (Target.com; $24.99). Flingsock, a spermatozoon-shaped suède beanbag, comes with a manual that details the many throwing and catching games that even a klutz can master (gophersport.com. or funattic.com; $8.95). The LeapFrog Fly Pentop Computer is an ultra-cool pen that talks (rather quietly), solves math problems, records music, and reads and remembers what you write (Toys R Us, 1514 Broadway; $124.99). Sharpening pencils is the least of the abilities of the walking Wind-Up Robot Pencil Sharpener (ToyTent.com; $24 for a pair). Apples to Apples (the Party Box), a funny card game that can be played by four to ten people ages twelve and up, is cerebral without making kids feel that their I.Q.s aren't up to snuff (Toys R Us; $24.99). A CD called "SpongeBob SquarePants: The Best Day Ever" is full of silly puns and has backup performances by Brian Wilson, Tommy Ramone, and Flaco Jimenez (Amazon.com; $13.98). The Euphori-Lock is an ice-cream security device that protects a person's pint of Vanilla Caramel Fudge against those dessert thieves who are the bane of dormitory dwellers and live-alone paranoiacs (Ben & Jerry's stores or at benjerry.com; $5.50). The rigid Boblbee backpack from Sweden looks like a futuristic vacuum cleaner or an ultra-mod turtle shell but is so sturdy that its contents could survive a street fight (Clearly First, 980 Madison Avenue; $175 for the Peoples Delite model, designed for laptops). For any boy or girl fed up with sharing a room with a sibling, consider the Icebox igloo tool, a rectangular plastic-shovel thing used to pack snow into bricks for ice houses (grandshelters.com or at selected stores in snowy cities such as BAP, 735 Oak Street, Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and Campus WheelWorks, 744 Elmwood Avenue, Buffalo, New York; $175.80 for the igloo; $39.95 for a snow-door mold; $6 for a DVD tutorial). On the chance that global warming is even more dire than Al Gore says, you might want to invest in Suddenly! Snow, a tube of non-toxic crystals, which, with the addition of water, will expand to a hundred and fifty times their original size to make mounds of flaky white stuff (sillyasstoys.com; $5.95). And if you know a child who wants to stretch some polydimethylsiloxane across the Brooklyn Bridge, Silly Putty can now be purchased in bulk (CrayolaStore.com; $76.99 for five pounds).

Thank heavens for your good sister. Your bad sister binds her gifts with "Crime Scene Do Not Cross" tape (CrimeScene.com; a hundred feet for $10) instead of festive ribbon, and has returned every gift you've ever given her, including a gift certificate. Your good sister has accepted your suggestion that the two of you stick to a thirty-dollar spending limit for each other, which means that you can afford to give her the amazingly effective Olay Regenerist Microdermabrasion & Peel System and treat yourself to one, too (about $28 at most drugstores).

A piece of Rimowa luggage could be just the thing for your bad sister, or anyone else you are urging to go away. These grooved suitcases, made of highly durable polycarbonate in stunning colors (check out tomato red and silver), might be the chicest luggage around. They are shockingly lightweight, too; the (empty) carry-on can be carried on with one's pinkie (Lexington Luggage, 793 Lexington Avenue; $199-$599). Your good sister, whose one flaw is that she can be too nice, has agreed to reinforce the message of your Rimowa Salsa 22" Globetrotter ($199) with a TomTom GO 300 navigation device for your bad sister's car (Circuit City, 52 East 14th Street; $379.99), so that when she finally goes away she will never feel lost.



BOSE NOISE CANCELLING HEADPHONES



BOBLBEE SWEDISH BACKPACK
-FOR LAPTOPS-

Perhaps your good sister's deep love of family should not be encouraged. Nevertheless, how could you resist giving her a DNA Ancestry Test? By mailing off a GeneSwab (provided) of inner-cheek cells, she will be able to trace her (and, presumably, your) ancestry back to the beginnings of the human race (GeneTree.com; $240). Whoops, the spending limit! Maybe for thirty dollars, they'd let her find out whether Uncle Lou is genuinely related, as he claims, to Sir Francis Drake, defeater of the Spanish Armada—doubtful, given Uncle Lou's jet-ski accident last summer.

Whoever is in search of a gift for an uncle like Lou should proceed directly to Beretta. This Italian firearm establishment dating from 1526 has an outpost at 718 Madison Avenue (at 63rd Street), where a gentleman can acquire a handmade premium shotgun with a European walnut stock for a hundred thousand dollars; it is, in the words of Robert, the general manager, "perfect for bird-shooting at Blenheim Palace." Also available is a suède-trimmed jacket of ocelot that might have been killed by said gun ($1,975), as well as a pair of hunting flashes (tasselled woollen garters) in a bird's-eye pattern ($28) that one might wear when killing said ocelot. A snobby uncle, we trust, would also enjoy a pocketknife made from exotic woods, mammoth ivory, and semiprecious stones ($525 to $1,600), any of which, according to Robert, would be ideal for cutting a loose thread off a lady's jacket or opening a box.

Here's a thorny one: what to get for your brand-new boyfriend, Josh. No, Josh (or was it Jake?) was the fellow before this one, the one who kissed you goodbye hours after you'd presented him with a sumptuous $560 Dobb kit in smooth calfskin leather with woven details from Bottega Veneta (699 Fifth Avenue, at 55th Street). Anyway, whoever the new guy is, play it safe with a pair of noncommittal chestnut kidskin gloves with cashmere lining ($82) from Sermoneta, a single-minded boutique that specializes in gloves (609-611 Madison Avenue, at 58th Street). And do not, under any circumstances, enroll him in the Bacon of the Month Club (gratefulpalate.com; twelve months, $140 plus shipping). In the likely event that you and he break up over the next few months, do you really want him to be saddened by every subsequent shipment of artisanal pork?

It has come to our attention that

LOOKING BACK IN MY EIGHTY-FIRST YEAR

Instead of marrying the day after graduation
in spite of freezing on my father's arm as
here comes the bride struck up,
saying, I'm not sure I want to do this,

I should have taken that fellowship
to the University of Grenoble to examine
the original manuscript
of Stendhal's unfinished "Lucien Leuwen,"

I, who had never been west of the Mississippi,
should have crossed the ocean
in third class on the Cunard White Star,
the war just over, the Second World War

when Kilroy was here, that innocent graffito,
two eyes and a nose draped over
a fence line. How could I go?
Passion had locked us together.

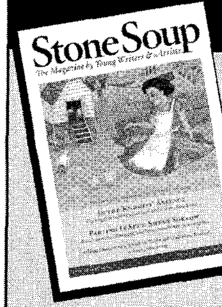
Sixty years my lover,
he says he would have waited.
He says he would have sat
where the steamship docked

till the last of the pursers
decamped, and I rushed back
littering the runway with carbon paper . . .
Why didn't I go? It was fated.

Marriage dizzied us. Hand over hand,
flesh against flesh for the final haul,
we tugged our lifeline through limestone and sand,
lover and long-legged girl.

—*Maxine Kumin*

THE LITERARY MAGAZINE BY CHILDREN



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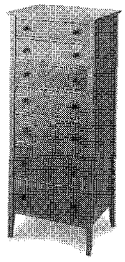

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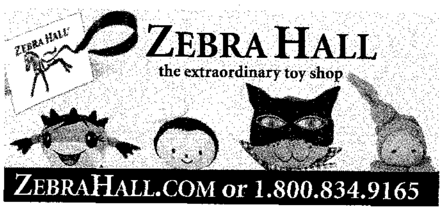

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your new fellow, what's-his-name, is no slouch. He plans to show up on Christmas Eve with three presents on his person. In one pocket he will have a funky lavaliere necklace with gigantic semi-precious stones and pellets of gold (Janis Provisor Jewelry; phone Debi Wisch at 212-369-2225; prices from $2,300 to $4,000) and, in the other pocket, a pair of socks, albeit a rather stylish pair from Japan in a pattern that's a hip take on Argyle (Antipast socks at Barneys New York, 660 Madison Avenue, at 61st Street; about $30). In his breast pocket he will carry a winsome silver ring that intricately weaves together the letters "L-O-V-E" (Blue Tree, 1283 Madison Avenue; $125). Which present he ultimately gives you will just depend now, won't it?

There is, unfortunately, no vender for new boyfriends. At thingofthemonth.com, though, it is possible to arrange for someone very deserving to receive monthly installments of any of the following: live critters ($175 for seven months), flying objects ($120 for a year), wooden toys ($75 for a year), non-military action figures ($150 for nine months), anatomical models ($300 for a year), and chemistry sets ($175 for a year). There is also the Potato Chip of the Month Club and the Beef Jerky of the Month Club ($236.99 and $269.99, respectively, at monthclubstore.com).

One thing that everybody you know would love to have this year is Norton GoBack 4.0 software (atomicpark.com; $49.95). This astonishing program can roll your computer back in time—a second, a minute, an hour, or even days—which makes it possible to undo system crashes, accidental file deleting, virus damage, human error, and most other calamities that might occur subsequent to its installation. Sadly, the software can do nothing about retrieving that humiliating e-mail you sent, against your better judgment, to Josh, or Jake, or was it Jason?

You didn't forget, I trust, that the Reverend Mike, who works on Christmas, promised to show up, however late, at your good sister's eggnog-and-cheese party. It would be advisable, therefore, to have a little something for the Reverend, since last year he arrived with bags of individually wrapped caramels for all, made by the Sisters of Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey, near Dubuque, who include with each box of candy a booklet describing their monastic life (trappistine.com; $14.25 for a box of classic vanilla; $12.95 for an assortment of plain and chocolate-coated; $42 for five pounds of chocolate). Perhaps this man of the cloth, who dabbles in carpentry (as did his Saviour), would have use for a screwdriver with six different bits, all of them stored at the top of a rotating barrel within the handle, where each can be loaded and later retracted by a pump-action mechanism ($29.95 at Garrett Wade, 161 Avenue of the Americas). He certainly will have less use for a copy of Richard Dawkins's fiercely argued "The God Delusion" (any bookstore; $27 list), which your bad sister has picked up for him because needling is her forte.

Don't think that you're finished. Your good sister needs Christmas ornaments—of the secular sort, since the tree is half Jewish. There are some appealing trinkets at the Transit Museum, including a 1903 Brooklyn Union Elevated Car and a hand-painted and glittered glass Metrocard (corner of Boerum Place and Schermerhorn Street, Brooklyn Heights, and at Grand Central Station; $24 and $30, respectively). And, really, you should save her from serving only cheese and eggnog at that party. Call up Greenberg Smoked Turkey, in Tyler, Texas, and have one of the company's super-friendly operators send her a smoked bird (903-595-0725 or gobblegobble.com; $3.65 a pound). A chocolate-cappuccino-mousse cake from Dessert Delivery wouldn't hurt, either ($51, serves fourteen to sixteen; 360 East 55th Street; 212-838-5411). And for the salad bring a bottle of sublimely sweet Compagnia Del Montale No. 10 balsamic vinegar. If Dean & DeLuca (560 Broadway, at Prince Street; $50) is sold out of it, you can find it on Amazon, where you will learn, incidentally, that customers who purchased this product also purchased Bob Woodward's "State of Denial."

And, by the way, that book is not about refusing to admit that Christmas is just around the corner and you are reading about shopping instead of doing it. ♦

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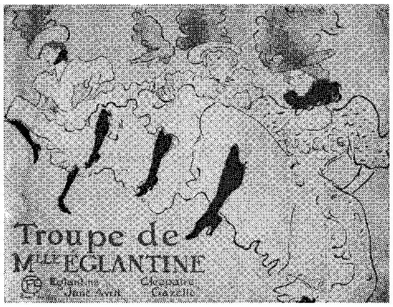

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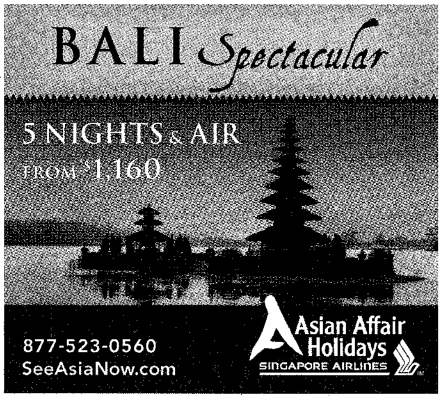
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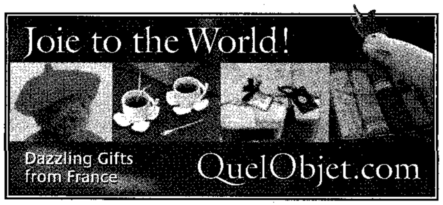
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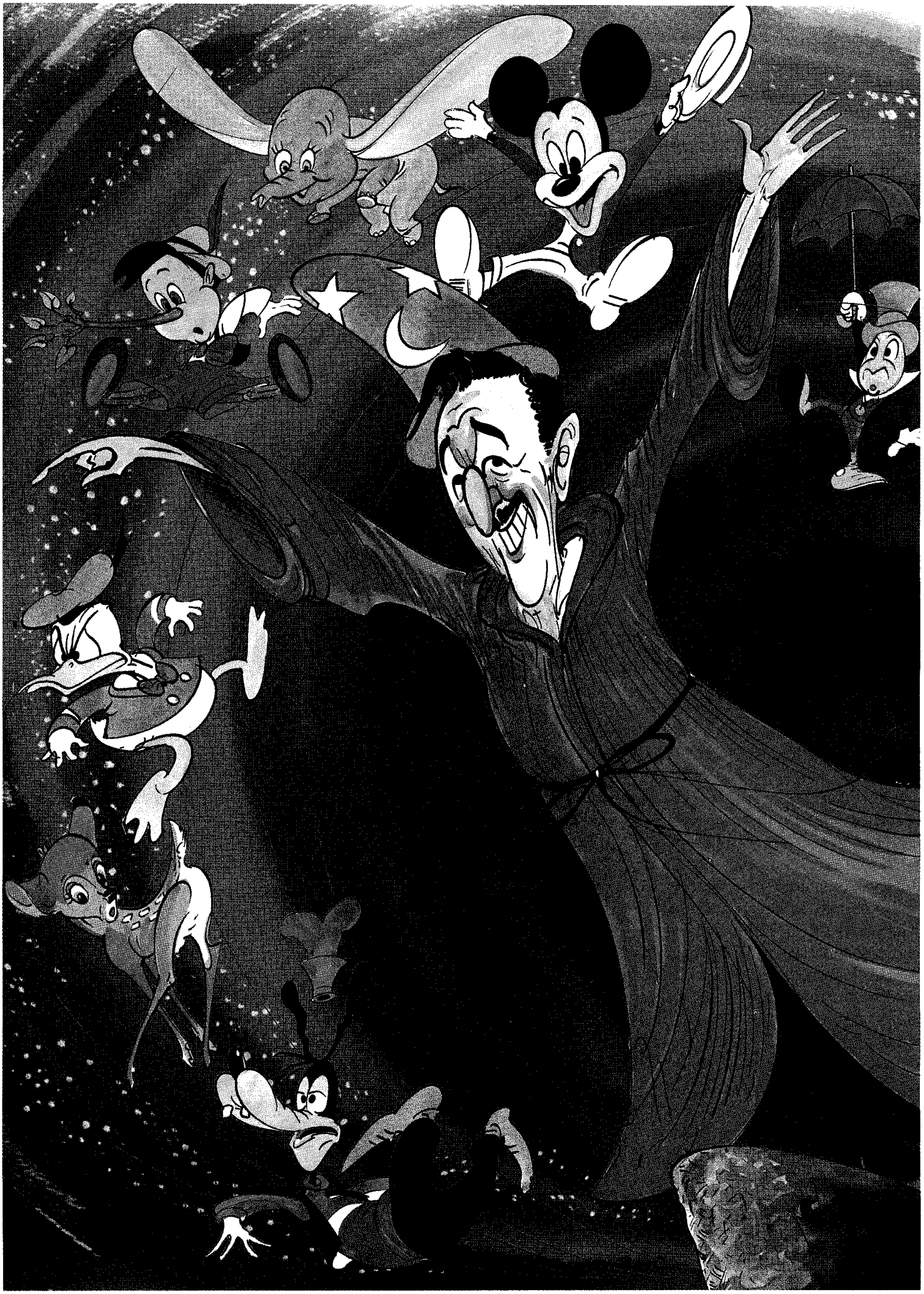


Disney was America's sorcerer-in-residence, and what we have yet to measure is the strength of his potions' aftereffects.

A CRITIC AT LARGE

WONDERFUL WORLD

What Walt Disney made.

BY ANTHONY LANE

The weather was kind to Anaheim, California, on July 17, 1955. So kind, in fact, that the heels of women's shoes got stuck in the warm asphalt. Anything other than sunshine would have been an insult to the opening of America's latest Shangri-La: Disneyland, or, as its creator called it, "the happiest place on Earth." On that day, if you believe one estimate, as many as twenty-eight thousand people poured through the gates, with seventy million more, about half the population of the country, watching the event on television. Walt Disney had already conquered TV through "Disneyland," which was broadcast every week on ABC, and that day the Mouseketeers, Disney's troupe of performing children, danced live for the public, wearing their black skullcaps with rounded ears—the most recognizable corporate headgear after that of the Playboy Bunnies. The broadcast was hosted by three celebrities, who, just to double the delirium, played hopscotch through the crowds around the park. One of them was the movie star Ronald Reagan.

Once upon a time, in "Bambi," Disney had sought to catch the living soul of nature on film. Now he was leaving it for dead. Within three years, his new monument would outstrip Yellowstone, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon as a tourist draw. His attention was turning to grander but more manageable things, as if the batting of a doe's eyelashes, or little April showers going drip-drip-drop, were no longer quite suited, or satisfying, to a man of the world. His ambitions rose, and with them went the plaudits of his followers; in 1962, Lillian and Dorothy Gish, two of the patron saints of Hollywood, travelled to Oslo to argue that Disney should be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Even now, forty years after his death, the slight figure of Walt himself is almost impossible to pick out from the parti-colored throng of movie clips, projects, and moral tendencies that march under the banner of "Walt Disney." Say the name to most people and you know what will flash onto their mind's eye: unashamedly bright hues, flying elephants, singing bears, corporate dominance, happy endings, and a helping of values that slip down as easily as ice cream. How did we arrive at this blinding apotheosis? One attempt at an answer, the most comprehensive to date, is provided by Neil Gabler, in "Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination" (Knopf; $35). Gabler takes more than eight hundred pages to tell and note his tale, which sounds excessive, but then Disney himself was a model of unflagging thoroughness, and, as Thumper would say, if you can't do nice annotations, then don't do nuthin' at all.

GERALD SCARFE

He was born Walter Elias Disney, on December 5, 1901, in Chicago. His father, Elias, was at that time a carpenter, and the first Disney-like note in the story is struck when we learn that Elias built the wooden cottage on Tripp Avenue in which his son was born. He helped to construct two more dwellings nearby, and you half expect to hear that one of them was rented out to dwarfs. One of the problems for Gabler, as for any biographer of Disney, is that he can hardly start to recount the exploits of his subject without sounding like the narrator of a Disney TV show. When Walt was four, he and his family moved to Marceline, Missouri, where, in Gabler's words, he

> often spent languid afternoons fishing with the neighbor boys for catfish and bowheads in Yellow Creek and skinny-dipping afterward. In the winter they would go sledding or skating on the frozen creek, building a bonfire on the shore to keep warm. Sometimes Walt would tag after Erastus Taylor, a Civil War veteran, who would relive his battle exploits. ("I don't think he ever was in a battle in the Civil War," Walt later said, "but he was in all of them.")

That last quotation drills us straight to the core of Disney's appeal. Far from chiding the old man for his fabrications, he is fondly and supportively amused. To be gripped by a story, especially one that is trawled from the past, is everything. To realize that it might not be true, or that it might have been blown up out of all proportion, is no big deal. Changing its proportions, in fact, could be just the ticket, because what are fables if not stories that have been lofted out of the reach of regular experience, no longer scratchable by the quibbles of common sense? As for blowing up, there is no better method for showing an image to a crowd—taking a mouse-size mouse, say, and throwing it onto a screen, where it assumes the dimensions, and some of the pluckier habits, of a man.

Marceline educated Disney. It taught him how to cherish good times, as if preparing them to be the objects of a later nostalgia. Was it really the case that when Buffalo Bill came to town he stopped his buggy mid-parade and asked the young Walt to join him? Did crusty old "Doc" Sherwood really give Walt a nickel for sketching his horse, Rupert? Another version of the story, cited by Gabler, has the doctor hanging the finished picture on the wall. Either way, Disney had done his first piece of business as an artist, and, according to his older brother Roy, it remained "the highlight of Walt's life." There would never be a time, indeed, when art was not a business, although what attracted Walt, throughout his career, was not so much the money that people traded for his art (that would be Roy's territory) as the eager numbers in which they came to view it, as if reassuring its creator that his dreams were just like theirs. Disney was hardly alone in locating bliss in some lost zone of childhood, and in striving to reconstruct it in the movies; without that primary impulse we would have no Andy Hardy, no "Meet Me in St. Louis," no "Citizen Kane." Disney taught the world to look back without anger, and he traced that look to a horse. Rupert was his Rosebud.

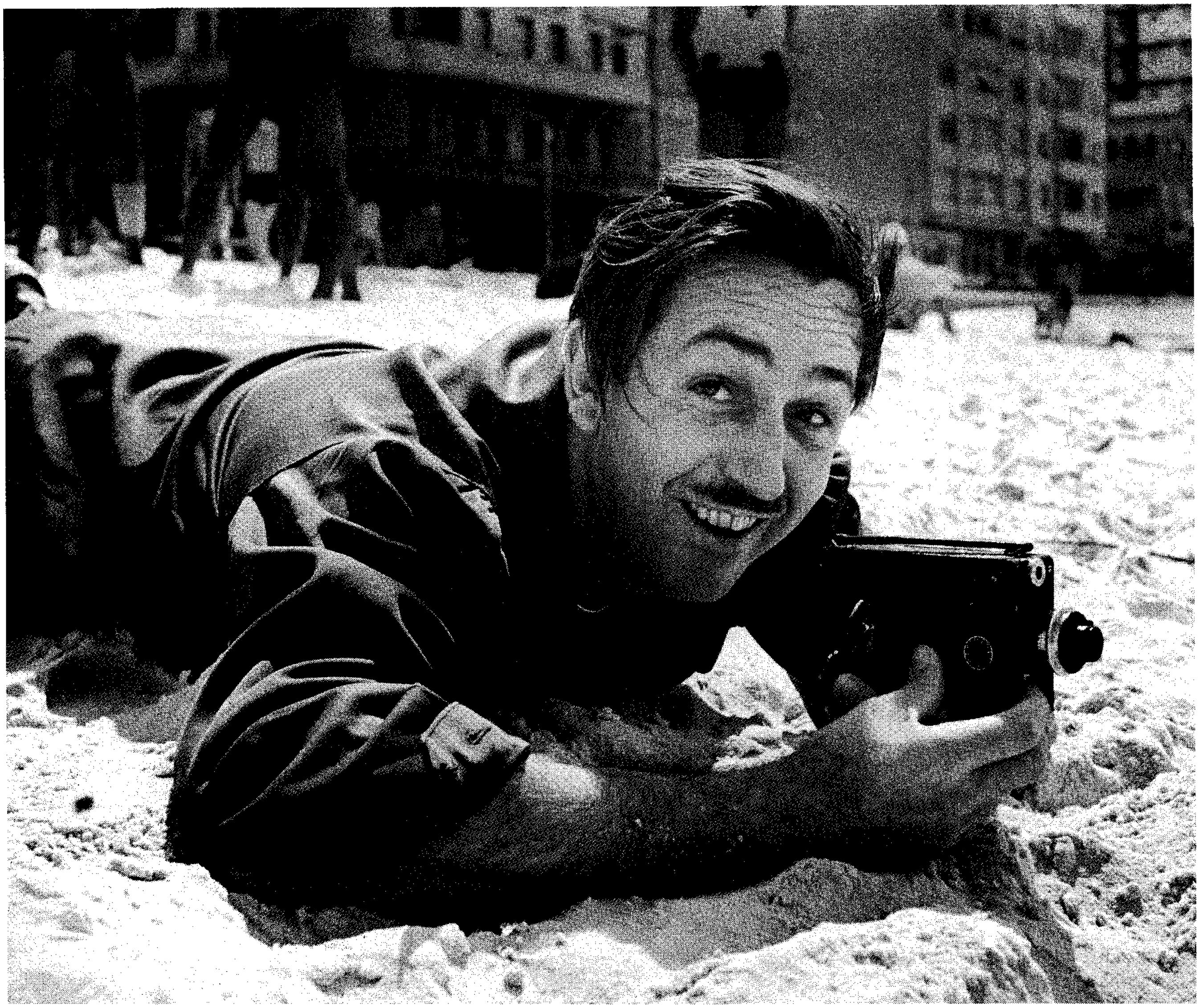
Elias farmed in Missouri, without much joy, and in 1911 the Disneys moved again, this time to Kansas City. There Elias ran a paper route, enlisting Walt and Roy as his delivery boys. Walt would get up for work in the dark, before school, and on Sundays he had a double load, which meant skipping church. (That was no loss. The grown-up Walt never went to church—a difficult smudge for those who acclaim him as the purveyor of all-American ways.) In later years, according to Gabler, "he talked of how the route and its demands—the unyielding routine, the snow, the fatigue, the lost papers—traumatized and haunted him." One thinks instantly of Dickens, and of his toils in the blacking factory. In each case, what scarred them was not pain—a job is a job, after all, and there were children everywhere subsisting in more brutal conditions—but sameness, without the prospect of relief. A thin-skinned, fanciful child will remember as torment what tougher spirits would regard as routine. Both Dickens and Disney came to believe, with a kind of humiliated pride, that their sufferings placed them in good stead with the travails of ordinary folk, who would henceforth be diverted by entertainments that would never lack for incident—that would, whatever their other qualities, swarm with animation. As G. K. Chesterton wrote, irrefutably, "Dickens did not write what the people wanted. Dickens wanted what the people wanted."

In "Walt Disney: Hollywood's Dark Prince," published in 1993, Marc Eliot lays out a gothic account of Disney family life ("Elias would march Roy and Walt to the woodshed and dispense his brutal punishments") and of its aftermath in the mind of the adult Walt. Gabler concedes that Elias Disney was a sour and angry man, embittered by his failure to hold down a job. (His two older sons, Herbert and Ray, left home early to seek their fortunes elsewhere.) But does that set him apart from a thousand other fathers of that time? If Walt was goaded into a frenzy of achievement, it was not because of a monster at his back but simply because, as a natural optimist and clown, he saw no profit in the deflated and the dour. Crowned "second dumbest" in the class by a teacher in Kansas City, he nonetheless found favor by performing comic turns (he did a mean Chaplin) and, in Gabler's laconic account, "decorating the margins of his textbooks with pictures and then entertaining his classmates by riffling them to make them move." By the time of the Disneys' next uprooting—to Chicago, in 1917—we sense an acceleration in Walt, with the father's restlessness (Elias was now employed by the O-Zell jelly-and-fruit-juice company) echoed in the hale, try-anything momentum of the son. Walt enrolled in night classes at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, and his high-school magazine labelled him "Artist," as if his fate could not be erased. A guy could go far on a riffle.

Instead of which, Walt Disney went to war. Or, at any rate, he tried. In 1918, at the age of sixteen (he altered the documentation to add a year), he enlisted in the Red Cross Ambulance Corps, but it was too late. Even so, after the Armistice, he was shipped to France—"an interesting place," he noted, although the highest dividend of his time there was a purse of three hundred dollars that he won at a craps game in Neufchâteau. By October, 1919, he was back in America, and setting out on the rising slope that would lead to Mickey Mouse. Returning to Kansas City, he found work as a commercial artist, joining forces with a taciturn, big-browed colleague called Ubbe Iwwerks to form their own company. (One of the delights of Gabler's book is the roster of proper names, many as rubberized as cartoons: Earl Scrogin, Friz Freleng, Grim Natwick, Pinto Colvig, Hardie Gramatky, Dr. Rufus von KleinSmid, and the Dr. Seuss-worthy Gus Van Schmus. Ubbe Iwwerks changed his name to Ub Iwerks, which didn't exactly help.) Walt drew print advertisements, then animated advertisements on film—or, at least, cutouts that could be moved and photographed, to give the impression of continuous action. By 1921, he was preparing for his own cartoons, lasting six or seven minutes, to be screened in cinemas ahead of the main features. Laugh-O-Gram Films, Inc., was registered the following year, with Disney listed as its president, despite the fact that, as Gabler points out, "he was still a minor and legally too young to be a corporate officer." Just like going to war.

The two hundred and ten pages of biography that whisk us from May 18, 1922, to December 21, 1937—or, if you prefer, from the creation of Laugh-O-Gram to the première of "Snow White"—read like a headlong thriller. The reason is clear. There is nothing more inspiring than to be in on the birth of a new art form or a new technology, and Disney was there for both. He was already using cels—transparent sheets of celluloid, which allowed him to manipulate the characters against a fixed background—but it was an artist friend named Rudy Ising who proposed that they draw directly on the cels instead of gluing images onto them. From a distance, that idea seems obvious, but these folk were having to make their medium up as they went along, fuelled by the sort of rushed and sleepless inventiveness that is barely conceivable beyond American shores. They were flying blind, and they were heading for a mouse.

"The first Mickey Mouse was made by twelve people after hours in a garage," Disney recalled. I would give a great deal to have been a fly on that garage wall, or a spider in the rafters. Already, Walt had acknowledged the lowliness of his own draftsmanship, and he was relying on the superior skills of others. That first Mickey picture, "Plane Crazy" (1928), was largely the work of Iwerks, who cranked out up to seven hundred drawings a day. He duly received a credit, but—and the question has dogged Disney scholars ever since—should he therefore get *the* credit? If Disney remains a test case for artistic contribution, that is because he threw out the romantic notion of what an artist should be and the distance at which he should hold himself from society. Disney was up to his neck in society—not high society, which held no appeal, but in appetites and aspirations so widespread, so sweet and low, that we scarcely bother to articulate them. It is true that Disney cartoons were not physically sketched by Disney, but you might as well complain that Henry



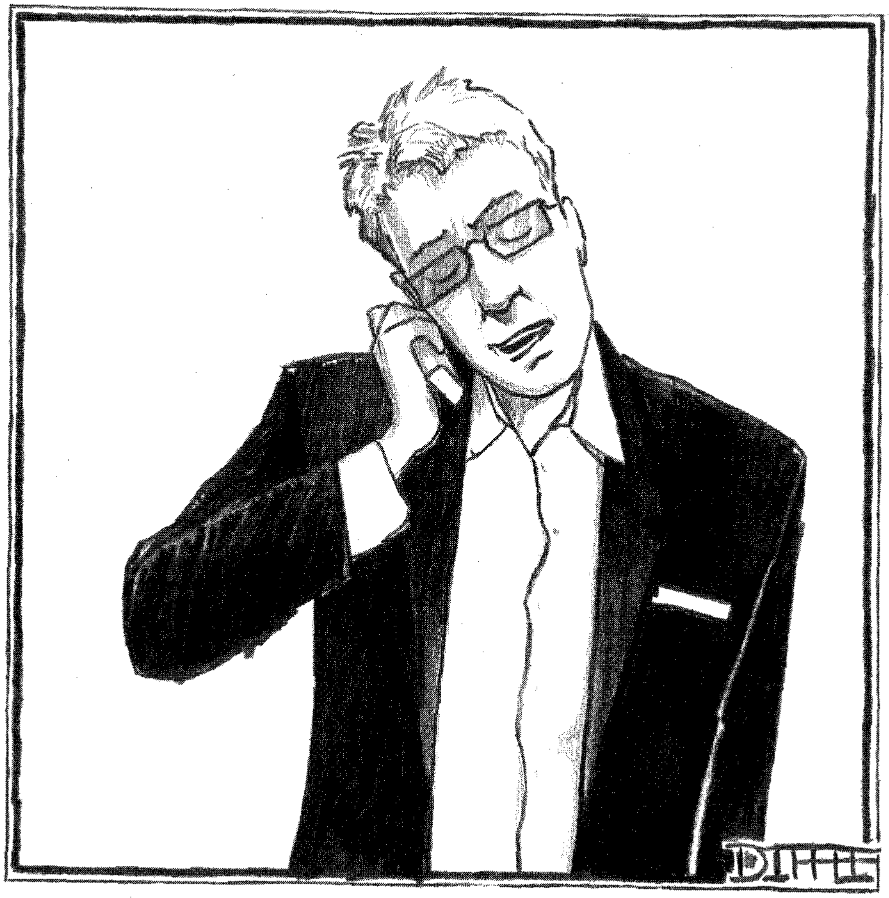
Disney in 1941. Between 1937 and 1942, he created "Snow White," "Pinocchio," "Fantasia," "Dumbo," and "Bambi."

HART PRESTON/TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

Ford was not to be found underneath a Model T, tightening nuts. Disney, in fact, was a tightener from the first, incessantly churning out gags, pulling apart and fixing the gags of others, and pained by the sloppy and the slack. "Snow White" was finished in a panic, and years later Disney was still fretting over the shortcomings of his heroine—not her ethical decision to hang out with a large group of small men, but the wobbles in her construction. "The bridge on her nose floats all over her face," he said. He became an industry, but the one thing that links the industrialist, whatever the product, with the auteur, whatever the form, is obsessive pedantry—the will to get things right, whatever the cost may be.

The best joke about Walt Disney is that he was not a good businessman. Anyone schooled in the legend of Disney the capitalist ogre must at some point deal with the fact that money, in itself, did not concern him. He didn't know how to spend it, throwing no lavish parties, dressing casually in sweaters and pants, and dining on cans of beans; he earned far less of it, for years, than seems economically possible, and plowed what did come along straight back into the company; and, as for raising it in order to finance his ventures, he tended to lunge into contracts without weighing what lay in store. (Roy described the first decade of Disney Studios as "bacon and eggs without the bacon.") Walt's early days fit the bill of the classic struggler, and Gabler tells of a Kansas City dentist hiring Laugh-O-Gram to make short films on dental hygiene, and of Disney being unable to go and close the deal, because "he had left his only pair of shoes at the shoemaker's and did not have the $1.50 he needed to retrieve them." Even after he arrived in Los Angeles, in 1923, with a bagful of confidence but little else, he and Roy could not start up Disney Bros. until they had secured some family loans—twenty-five dollars from Roy's girlfriend and five hundred from their Uncle Robert, who split the loan into four installments and charged them eight per cent interest. Do I hear the first, faint quack of Scrooge McDuck?

The problem with borrowing cash to make a cartoon was that, likely as not, you would hit a new wrinkle as you went along. It would be a wrinkle that neither you nor your backer had foreseen, but the challenge of ironing it out would be far too tempting to skip. In October, 1927, for instance, America woke up to "The Jazz Singer." By



"I have to go. I'm getting a better call."

• •

May, 1928, Disney was calling a halt to the production of silent cartoons. "Damn it, I know how fast film goes," he was heard to say, "but how fast does music go?" In late June, "probably around eight o'clock" (Gabler is most gripping when at his most precise), a scene from what would become "Steamboat Willie," starring Mickey Mouse, was projected onto a bedsheet and watched in trepidation by the studio's employees. One man with a harmonica and others tapping pencils on spittoons positioned themselves with a view of the sheet but out of sight of the audience, and tried, until two in the morning, to match the noise to the spectacle. Further experiments came and went. A tryout with an orchestra, on September 15th of that year, was a notable flop, but Disney's letters and memos of the time sound like lines from popular songs: "Old Man Opportunity rapping at our door"; "Slap as big a mortgage on everything we got"; "'Are we downhearted?' HELL NO."

That clarion call should be borne in mind whenever Disney is berated for his cheerfulness. Again, it echoed the good cheer of Dickens: not a vapid exhortation to enjoy the easy life but the half-desperate will to soldier on even when trouble has a paw in the door. Thus, in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated in March, "Three Little Pigs" came out in May, and before long this curt, boisterous fable was being praised for reflecting—and positively boosting—the pick-me-up gutsiness of the New Deal, guaranteed to chase away the lupine ravenings of the Depression. The fact that it was one of the first Disney projects in color (all those rounded, pleasurable pinks) was hardly going to harm its prospects, and if Walt's new fixation was to banish black-and-white, well, such eager boyishness was never hard to sell. To praise somebody as a man of his time is vague and often condescending, but with Disney the claim could not be more exact. Well after he had ceased to make promotional films in favor of clean teeth, he retained the capacity to read a national mood and answer its demands, as though on private commission. If the song had run, "Don't Be Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf," it would have sounded like a public lecture or a distressed parent. To ask the question "Who's afraid?" put Disney at the level of the playground. It was a taunt, and it waited for the shout of an answer: "Not me!"

To understand Disney's advance, you need to go to Paris. In particular, you need to go to Paris before January 15th, to the Grand Palais, which is home to an exhibit of Disney's art. This in itself is astounding. To the French mind, Disney represents the arrowhead of American cultural assault, and if America were to return the favor it would need to mount a major retrospective of soft, unpasteurized French cheese at the Metropolitan Museum. The show is predicated on the belief that Disney engendered much that was rich and strange in the iconography of the twentieth century and that the dissemination of those icons, however fiercely you object to it, makes his collected works as potent as those of any other artist. When you read in Gabler's book that by 1935, before the arrival of full-length Disney features, Mickey Mouse was responsible for the sale of five hundred million movie tickets around the world, you must admit that the Parisians have a point.

The exhibit gathers some of the most delicate artwork that was summoned into being by Disney's wand. There is a wonderful gouache of the sorcerer's cavern, from "Fantasia" (1940), with the shell-like spiral of staircase winding up into the ominous dark. Below it hangs the same scene, this time in oil on paper. The sole addition is the figure of Mickey creeping along, his ears throwing bulbous circles of shadow on the opposite wall. What, the show invites us to ask, has happened here? Is it not funny, and fitting, that a cartoon hero should tiptoe through a scene from German Expressionism, the New World prankster dropped into a roomful of old European fears? Or does it mark the irredeemable progress from seriousness to kitsch, the hijacking of art for the advancement of the crass, which Disney-haters pinpoint in his style? The debate is deepened by a wonderful double act in the second room of the show, where sequences from early Disney are projected next to matching clips from masterpieces of live-action cinema. "The Mad Doctor" (1933), in which Mickey is strapped to a table beneath a descending circular saw, is juxtaposed with the laboratory scene from "Frankenstein" (1931) which suggested it. Charlie Chaplin is force-fed by machine, in "Modern Times" (1936), and in "Modern Inventions," made the next year, Donald Duck is duly force-painted with shoe polish. As for "Fantasia," what plunderings it required! First, there is the bewitching, sky-high devil who towers over the town in Murnau's "Faust" (1926), and his no less lofty descendant in the "Night on Bald Mountain" section of the Disney film. And, yes, there is Mickey and that staircase, and here is its source: the flickering shadow steps of "The Golem," directed by Paul Wegener way back in 1914.

Who did the borrowing here? Who knew about Wegener films? It comes as a shock to read that Disney and his wife, Lillian, whom he married in 1925, "socialized throughout the 1930s with the Spencer Tracys," and that it was Chaplin—a Disney addict from the start, and a wellspring of advice—who wired Walt on the first night of "Snow White" to predict that "all our fondest hopes will be realized tonight," because for much of Gabler's book you get a sense that Disney's operations ran in a vacuum of their own devising. I knew that "Steamboat Willie," the first Mickey film with sound, was a nod to Buster Keaton's "Steamboat Bill, Jr.," but nothing in the biography had prepared me for the intense cross-referencing of the Paris show. Only when you study the artists who were lured to work for Disney does the story click into place. Not only were they encouraged to watch, and steal from, as many new releases as possible, in every genre; their own tastes, which ran to the great illustrative artists of Europe (Honoré Daumier, Gustave Doré, and Arthur Rackham), also seemed to equip and armor them for the parade of fairy tales and children's classics on which Disney had his eye.

What he gathered was a gang of wanderers, outsiders, and post-European misfits. So did many other producers (that is half the story of Hollywood), but animation held a peculiar attraction for the lonely and the avid, who craved nothing more than pencil, paper, and peace. There was Vladimir (Bill) Tytla, born in Yonkers, the hefty son of a Ukrainian father and a Polish mother. Wolfgang Reitherman had been born in Germany, the last of seven children; he would wind up directing "The Jungle Book." Milt Kahl, too, had a German father, who abandoned the family. (In a company questionnaire, Kahl listed his hobby as "sexual intercourse.") Art Babbitt had lived like a bum in New York before he turned to art. Ward Kimball remembered a shiftless childhood, attending twenty-two schools. Marc Davis, in Gabler's words, "was the son of a first-generation Jew of Russian extraction who traveled the country with a mindreading act before landing finally in Klamath Falls, Oregon." There's a whole novel concealed in that sentence.

In one sense, Disney's choice of subjects was bizarre. How would all these feudal formulas—the princes who crown the climaxes of "Snow White," "Cinderella," and "Sleeping Beauty"—play in a modern republic? In the event, they scarcely mattered. Nobody leaves those movies pining for the unfailingly limp human males into whose arms the spunky heroines fall. Indeed, to criticize the Disney corpus as pap ignores the fact that pap was the thing that Disney, at his best, did worst of all. What lodges in the brain, after Snow White has been yanked out of her glass casket, is the macabre punch of the buildup: the poisoned apple rolling from her outstretched hand, the witch transfigured from a snotty Joan Crawford figure to something yet more disturbing. (Her voice was provided by Lucille La Verne, who is said to have managed the transition to a cackle by the simple expedient of removing her false teeth.) As for the sight of the threatened girl haring through the forest, pursued by a posse of swirling leaves, with the branches clawing at her clothes, it possesses not just the sharp-toothed, half-Teutonic atmosphere that Disney could reliably conjure from his artists; it is also edited with a violent sophistication that chops straight into children's dreams. For a moment, it looks like Eisenstein.

It is no surprise, then, to learn that the director of "Battleship Potemkin" and "Ivan the Terrible" was a Disneyphile. "The work of this master," Eisenstein claimed, "is the greatest contribution of the American people to art." His comments on the subject, part of a book begun in 1941 and never finished, are available in a French edition of 1991;

IF I HAD KNOWN I COULD HOLD MY BREATH SO LONG I COULD HAVE MADE MONEY AS A SIDESHOW ATTRACTION INSTEAD OF BORROWING FROM THE MOB.
P.C. VEY

DECEMBER: REVISITING MY OLD ISOLATION ROOM

Lit window—
I know you're still up
there
(in the past)
where I left you

Scrawny starlings building
out of nothing hopeless shelter
in the snowy corner of
that window gone abruptly dark

I freely stand here
watching
while you burn
unheard
among the screaming, the

zombies, the pacers, the shit-fingerpainters and furious nocturnal soliloquists

A bone-freezing wind blows. My mother

within three pages, the Russian has lauded the "absolute perfection" of the American's achievement and linked his name to those of Fra Angelico, Hans Christian Andersen, and St. Francis of Assisi. Disney the anthropomorphist is conjoined with La Fontaine as someone who grasps, and dramatizes, the relentless way in which animals "hold up to their older brother—man—a deforming mirror." It is the moral and social upheaval that is promised by such deformation which galvanizes Eisenstein, who worships the elasticity of cartoon characters, ascribing to it what he calls a "literalization of metaphor." We talk of horseplay, of somebody who drinks like a fish and winds up as sick as a dog, but we stop at the metaphor; Disney somehow breaks through the language—not difficult, in the days when he was still shooting silent pictures—and locates the brute behavior that lurks behind it. He is not humanizing animals; he is decivilizing ordinary life, which is a far more subversive path to take, and sometimes he weeds out the human factor altogether. The animator's trick, once more, is to rediscover the spirit, the anima, that breathes life into our descriptions of the world. When Donald Duck bursts through a door or pops round to see a friend, the bursts and pops are plainly there to see. In "The Opry House," a short from 1929, Mickey Mouse, giving a concert piano performance, has to quell an insurrection in his instrument. Two keys turn rough and have to be subdued, and at one point the whole piano turns around and, bucking its hind legs, kicks him like a mule.

That is why Eisenstein chose to deal with early-period Walt. There was insolence and devilry in the artwork, and a definite dash of arousal: selected portions of Mickey would stretch and squeeze, as if his entire shape were tumescent. Take "The Barn Dance," a seven-minute hoedown of music, mutilation, and rivalry made by Walt Disney in 1928, in which Mickey Mouse takes Minnie to a dance. He keeps treading on her feet, and the more he treads the more his own feet fatten and swell, till they reach the size of anvils. By now he is stamping on her legs, one of which grows so long and thin, like a strand of black spaghetti, that she stops dancing, ties a loop in it, reaches into her bloomers, pulls out a pair of scissors, and cuts off the excess. She also takes revenge, without hesitation, by turning to a second suitor—who is huge and overbearing, with a predatory leer. The little guy, however, isn't beaten yet. He finds a balloon, shoves it down the seat of his pants, floats over the intruder, lands in front of his girl, and starts to hoof once more. No cartoon balloon, however, has ever gone unpopped, and "The Barn Dance" closes with Mickey, deflated and recuckolded, gazing into the camera and weeping inky tears.

How far could Disney have gone with these bendable bodies? Did he ever, in the hideaway of his nightmares, draw something like this?

> These breasts are nearly as large as the woman herself, and they have nipples on them that turn sequentially into pursed lips, dripping spigots, traffic lights, beckoning fingers, then lit-up pinball bumpers. The real policeman is not completely real, after all. He has cartoon eyes that stretch out of their sockets like paired erections, locking on the cartoon woman's breasts with their fanciful nipples. She takes her breasts off and gives them to the real policeman, and he creeps furtively away, clutching the gift closely like a fearful secret, his eyes retracting deep into his skull as though to empty it of its own realness, what's left of it.

The passage comes from "Cartoon," a short story collected in Robert Coover's 1987 "A Night at the Movies." The phrase "its own realness" is awkwardly put, but the awkwardness feels right, because it matches the uneasy pact, familiar to all animators, between ordinary experience and the outlandish world that they have made. (Sometimes, as in "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?," from 1988, the two collide head-on.) "I definitely feel that we cannot do the fantastic things based on the real unless we first know the real," Disney said, setting his sights on what he termed the "plausible impossible." It was a deal that he would refine in the string of full-length masterworks that he delivered between 1937 and 1942: "Snow White," "Pinocchio," "Fantasia," "Dumbo," and "Bambi." Sex, of course, has been utterly stripped from these works, not just because of the children in the audience, and the reinforcement of the Hays Code of 1934, but because Disney was by now demanding greater gravity, in every sense, from his artists. The characters would no longer balloon at will, like the Mickey of "The Barn Dance," but would keep their feet on the ground, with all the moral purpose that such a stance implied. Heaven

always left a shot of whiskey out
for Santa Claus, someone confides
quietly
close to my ear
twenty years ago . . .

I think someone had lighted a candle for me
I am sure of it
with so few plausible causes
to justify the current
and remarkably convincing
impression of one of the normal
with which I now (most days) present. But

the unvisited

in dark churches,
                        by their families now
unmentioned:

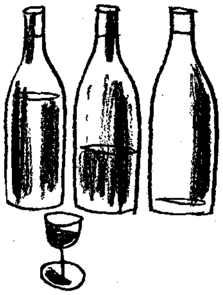
wind, cold wind, they blow the candles out and haunt Noël.

—*Franz Wright*

knows how that felt to a lover of mutability like Eisenstein, but it was essential to the smooth running of the longer narrative; if the dwarfs could ooze through keyholes or suddenly grow to be man-size, Snow White would be less inclined to mother them. Realism in the backdrops, too, became all the rage; the Paris exhibit includes exquisite backgrounds for "Pinocchio" (the most ravishing of all the films), some of them painted on glass. Only if Geppetto's workshop and the hamlet in which it stood (modelled on the Bavarian town of Rothenburg ob der Tauber) struck the eye as architecturally sound and furnished with a welcoming warmth would we accept the presence of a top-hatted insect as narrator. "What they can't do these days!" Jiminy Cricket exclaims.

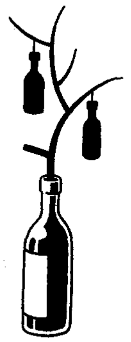
As those capacities multiply, what is to stop the inventor? Good taste? A terror of excess? Neither is much of a brake in a global enterprise. The desire to press ahead, and to develop the next big thing, is what finally turns both the Paris show and Gabler's biography into sad affairs. Disney was badly scalded by a strike at the company in 1941, which earned him a reputation, especially among union men, as something of a tyrant—although one might argue, in retrospect, that nobody could craft a film as persnickety and labor-intensive as "Pinocchio" and expect to make much of a profit. (If you added together the man-hours spent on the artwork for "Snow White," they would total two hundred years.) The options were unpalatable—cuts in the workforce or a falling-off in quality—and Disney, who managed to end up with both, would never again enjoy the same bond of trust with his artists, or the same liberty to push animation to its limits. To compare "Pinocchio" with "Peter Pan," released in 1953, is to pass from the embrace of magic to the selling of a cute idea, from the densely detailed to the dismayingly flat. The bestowing of life upon a wooden child is a perfect symbol of the animator's art, whereas the flying lesson that Peter gives to the Darlings has the air of a cocky stunt. Disney himself was under no illusions. "We're through with caviar," he said. "From now on it's mashed potatoes and gravy."

JACQUES DE LOUSTAL



The case against Walt Disney, which remains as sturdy as the fact that it can never win, is only in part a grudge against his films. Many parents, for instance, take issue with the merchandise, although it is nothing new. Thanks to Gabler, we are introduced to Herman (Kay) Kamen, an ungainly marketing wizard from Baltimore, who, in his four years at Disney, from 1933 to 1937, increased the licensing of Disney products by ten thousand per cent, and who boasted that his finest feat was "getting the Three Little Pigs up in lights in New York's strictly kosher Ghetto, and making them like it." I am sure that if Kamen were alive today he would be nudging me toward the Seven Dwarfs' Cottage Limited-Edition Cuckoo Clock, available online for a mere hundred and ninety-nine dollars. I could sit and watch the time while wearing my Grumpy Loafer Slippers, noted for their "handsome suede accents." Formerly priced at $16.95, they are now a steal at just under ten bucks. So many treasures, so little time.

To the seasoned protester, however, Exhibit A is and always will be Disneyland, followed swiftly by its sister parks in Orlando, Paris, Tokyo, and Hong Kong. In 1955, the year Disneyland opened, the company earned more than twenty-four million dollars, which meant that "for the first time in seventeen years," as Gabler writes, "Walt Disney Productions was flush." From the start, there was no mistaking the symbolic clout of the place. Disney may have designed it to hover between the child's and the adult's view of reality, like a magnified toy (the stores tapered from nine-tenths scale at ground level to seven-tenths at the top), but behind that cunning lurked a weird presumption—a yearning to corral the world and cut it down to size. Then, there were the inhabitants. The enduring glory of animation was that it could cram exhilarating depths of energy onto a two-dimensional surface; Mickey Mouse is by his very nature more antic than Chaplin and more volatile than even the Marx Brothers in their windmilling prime. To pluck him from that kinetic environment and stuff him into a synthetic suit, with a fixed grin and a padded ass, may be to grant him another dimension, but it is also, and more disastrously, to slow him down. Mickey ceases to be the fount of chaos; he is now a lumbering doll, made soft and safe. It is that smoothing of rough edges which distresses the cineast, appalls the political cynic, and tempts generations of iconoclasts. Hence the recent scandal, which spread across the Internet, in which employees dressed as Mickey, Minnie, Chip, Dale, and other favorites were filmed simulating sex at Disneyland Paris. It was a heresy waiting to happen. No such outrage punctuated my own visit, some years ago, but even a morally upright trip left a definite dent in the spirits. Standing in the rain on Main Street, grimly biding one's time in the hope of a high-five with Goofy: is there a more foolproof way to break the will of a man? I would have had more fun waiting for Godot.



It was in the wake of Disneyland that cultural disdain of Walt began to stir. By the nineteen-sixties, commentators were seething. Vincent Scully wrote in *Life*, in 1965, that "Disney caters to the kind of phony reality that we all too readily accept in place of the true. Mr. Disney, I'm afraid, has our number." Scully was discussing architecture, but you can imagine his terms of indictment being applied to almost any practice of the present day, starting with television and political spin. Disney has somehow become shorthand for the cushioning with which, knowingly or otherwise, we protect and console ourselves against experience: "All the conflicts of the real world, the nerve centers of bourgeois society, are purified in the imagination in order to be absorbed and co-opted into the world of entertainment." That comes from "How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic," a celebrated broadside written by Ariel Dorfman (later the author of "Death and the Maiden" and other plays) and Armand Mattelart. It was published in Chile in 1971, two years before the counter-revolution and the installing of a military regime, when it was banned. The book is a wrathful besmirching of what its authors identify as "the laundering process" in Disney, and its conclusions have filtered down into the consciousness of *bien-pensants* around the world. As so often, the left offers the most acute analysis of commercial enterprise and its use as propaganda without knowing quite what to make of the results, and some of the logic would strike even Pluto as a mess. You cannot, for instance, berate Disney for reinforcing the hegemony of the nuclear family and also argue, as Dorfman and Mattelart do, that "it is Disney who is the worst enemy of family harmony." As they observe, "there is one basic product which is never stocked in the Disney store: parents."

It's a good point, though. Uncles and nephews, giddy from their lack of responsibility, swarm through the comics and films. Substitute parents—Snow White, Geppetto, Bagheera, and Baloo—slide into place to fill a need, and even Bambi, before he is orphaned, is for all practical purposes the product of a single parent. His father is seen in full patriarchal splendor, lording it over the females, on a high rock: a distant pose that will be recaptured by Simba's father, fifty-two years later, in "The Lion King." The preferred Disney habit is to mix yourself an instant family, stirring together a handful of unlikely acquaintances; even "Lady and the Tramp" is more of a buddy picture than a romance, despite the spaghetti-linked kiss and the crossbred puppies at the end. It is a habit that endures to this day, as in the "Toy Story" films, made by Pixar under the aegis of Disney. To judge by the conduct of Buzz Lightyear and Woody, Disney has bequeathed us not so much a vision of sanitized domesticity as a ramshackle guide to the art of brotherly love. Would he have fancied himself as Buzz, in guileless pursuit of the infinite, with only the Woodyish Roy to keep him in check? Disney once claimed that his films were not made for children. If so, that is both the most touching and the most frightening thing about him. He saw the child in us all, and treated us accordingly. He took charge of Neverland, and his chosen audience, orphaned by the rigors of adult life, was a billion Peter Pans.

The profound irony of Disney is that, long ago, he was a hero to the left. Whether or not he aimed to compensate for the severity of his own father, his adult family of choice was the one that he chose to fabricate in the great days of Mickey, on Hollywood's Hyperion Avenue. It ran along the lines of a utopia. "Sometimes we have good old-fashioned scraps, but in the end things get ironed out and we have something we're all proud of," Disney said. By the time work began on "Snow White," the setup was more like a medieval guild, with artists hastening to work in the morning, compulsory life-drawing classes, baseball games on the lot (married men versus singles), no time clock, and, according to Gabler, "three sick days in any given week with full pay before anyone investigated." Disney, he continues, "was constantly on the lookout for any employee who he felt might be underpaid, and he would then instruct the payroll office to make a salary adjustment." When "Snow White" finally appeared, he made good on his promise that everyone concerned would get a bonus, which he declared would be equivalent to three months' salary; the total cost to the company was seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. "This place runs on a kind of Jesus Christ communism," Disney said.

How, then, did Disney acquire his reputation as a kind of dark messiah—"Hollywood's Dark Prince," as Marc Eliot labels him? What Eliot offers is a pathological horror story, in which the unhappy child makes bitter, long-range amends by becoming quietly anti-Semitic and loudly anti-Communist, and maintaining friendly relations with the F.B.I. (J. Edgar Hoover designated Disney a "Special Agent in Charge contact" in 1954.) His main grouse to the authorities seems to have concerned Herbert Sorrell, the union leader who had inflamed the Disney strike in 1941. Over all, Eliot's accusing tone is too melodramatic for Gabler, who finds scant evidence of anti-Jewish sympathies in Disney and prefers to present him as a connoisseur of control—a man who believed he could put the world to rights, or at least restore it to some level of prelapsarian order. In 1963, the publicity director at Disneyland told Kevin Wallace, a reporter from this magazine, "You never know when you'll bump into Walt prowling around the park in an old sweater, checking on whether a dead light bulb he reported a week earlier has

JOOST SWARTE

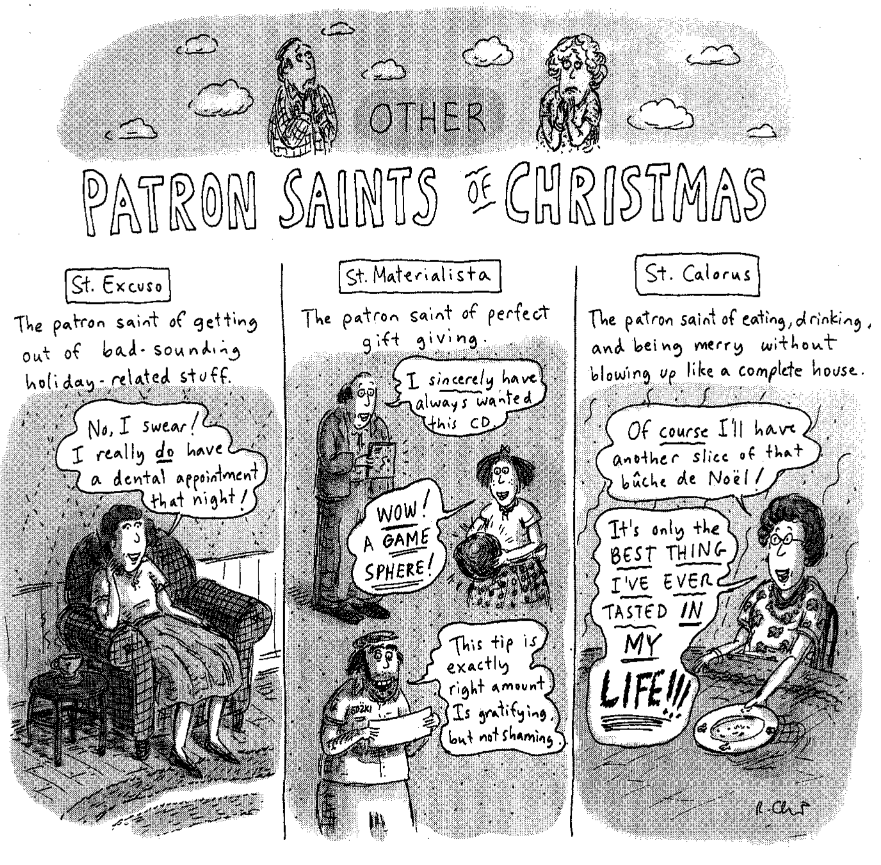
been replaced." At an indefinable point along the scale of Disney's triumph (and he cannot be alone in this regard, among the great barons of American success), the perfectionist impulse was warped into a compulsion. When the artists of the mid-nineteen-thirties found Chesterfield butts in their ashtrays in the morning, they suspected that Walt had been snooping around their desks at night and spying on their work. Is that behavior the forgivable flip side of genius, or does it foretell the Disney who appeared as a friendly witness before the HUAC hearings in the fall of 1947? "I feel that everybody in my studio is one hundred per cent American," he assured the committee.

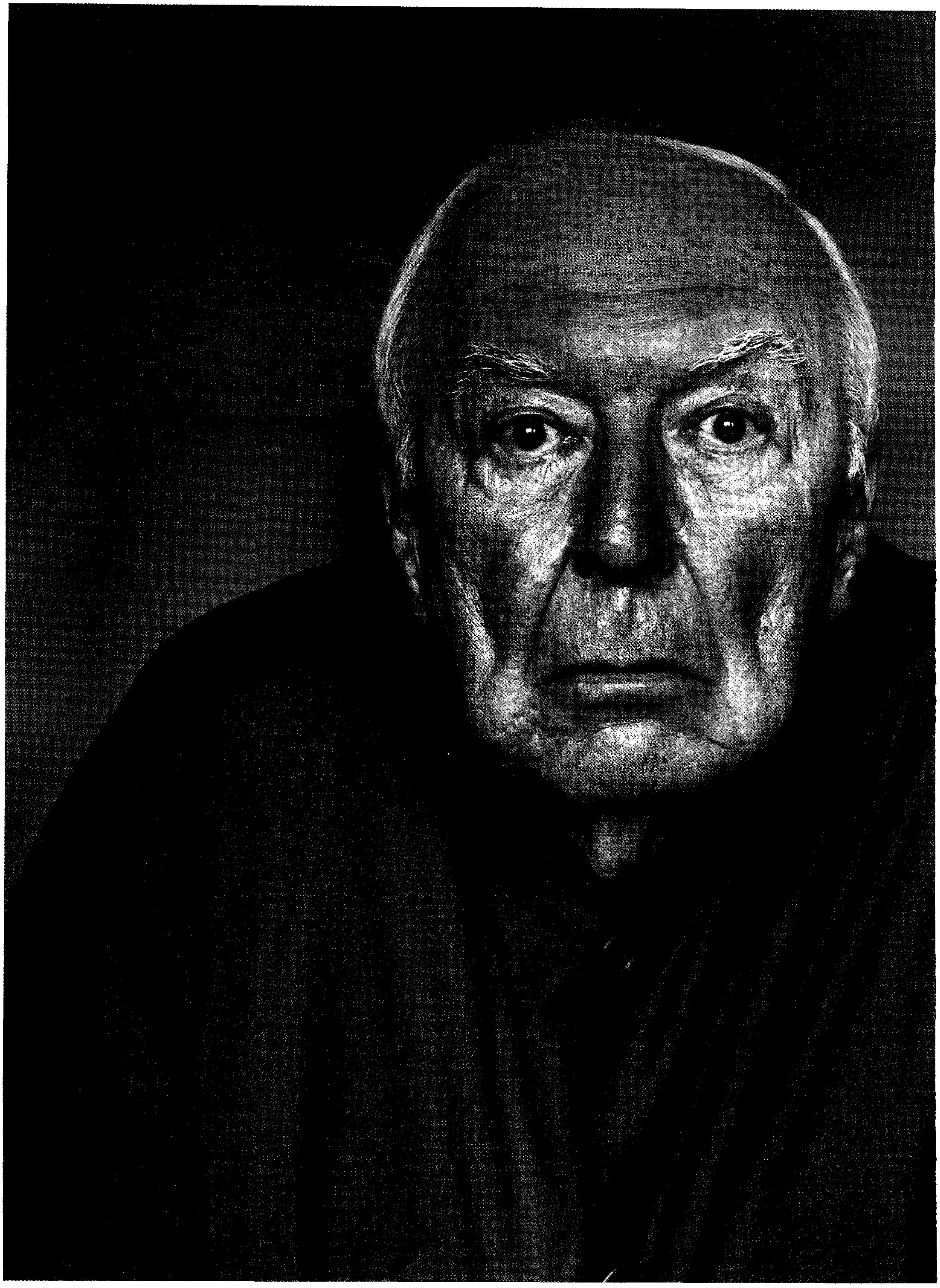
He was on his way to becoming "Uncle Walt," that figure of faintly sinister geniality who bestrode the postwar scene. The joshing, scruffy Disney who used to sprinkle enthusiasm, like fairy dust or fever, upon his willing employees grew both touchy and untouchable. According to Eliot, he shot footage of Kirk Douglas and his sons Michael and Joel as they rode a miniature train around the Disney household, and spliced it into an episode of "Disneyland" without permission; Douglas took legal action but dropped the suit. "You can't sue God," he remarked. By this stage, Disney's career was a glare of fame and wealth. It was also a tragedy, in that neither of those shining grails had impelled him to enter the business in the first place and because he was obliged to squander most of the capital that he had accrued as an original artist. The heraldic grandeur of "Sleeping Beauty" (1959) has its fans, but it feels like the frozen leftover of another age, as if in thrall to the spell of Maleficent. There is a sorrowful cameo in Gabler's book, not long before Disney's death, when the ailing master sits down to survey his latest product: "He spent most of the rest of the afternoon watching a rough cut of 'The Happiest Millionaire' and wept throughout." Were those tears of gratification, or was he missing Mickey?

We have all been children, and many of us have children of our own; in the twenty-first century, that puts us squarely in Disney's debt. We may resent that state of affairs, but to no avail. Although I can open Kipling's "The Jungle Book" and start to read, in my ear the boom of Phil Harris—Disney's own choice for the voice of Baloo—is already starting to kick in, blaring "The Bare Necessities" and drowning the original text. Cruella De Vil is my archetype of the knife-thin diva, with a lunatic's burning eyes. (In the words of Ward Kimball, who worked for Walt over many years, "Almost all of his villains were either women or cats.") As for Mary Poppins, the gratifying standout of Disney's final years, she demonstrated his preternatural, Prospero-like knack for conjuring a spirit from thin air (Julie Andrews was nothing like the Mary of the novels) and persuading us that she had always been around. She is the least witchy of his dominatrices, and in her prescription for the pleasures of industry she comes close to the appeal of Disney himself:

> In every job that must be done
> There is an element of fun;
> You find the fun, and—*snap*—
> The job's a game!

The work ethic transmuted, with a click of the fingers, into a lark: what better alchemy for an America ineluctably on the rise? Disney was the sorcerer-in-residence, and what we have yet to measure, in reviewing the range of his potions, is the strength of the aftereffects. Did he gull us into a fatal simplicity, or was our thirst for Disneyland and its accompanying fables already present, just waiting to be slaked? That was Disney's own contention—that we all had a Marceline, Missouri, secreted in our hearts, or deep in our common memory, and that his task was to set it free. "I have no recollection of ever being unhappy in my life," he once said. That is both wishful thinking and bad remembering. Everyone recalls being distressed by the death of Bambi's mother, and of his stick-legged pining in the snow, but how many of us recall what happens next? The oblivious birds strike up an immediate chorus: "Let's sing a gay little spring song, tra-la-la." The episode is closed, like a trapdoor. And so it is with Walt Disney. He succumbed to lung cancer in 1966, but the legend of him barely missed a beat, and his legacy, visible in everything from our viewing habits to our voting patterns, remains bewildering. In the wonderful world of Disney, death is at worst an accident and at best a blip. Immortality beckons, for mice and men, and life, being a show, goes on. ♦


OTHER
PATRON SAINTS OF CHRISTMAS
St. Excuso
The patron saint of getting out of bad-sounding holiday-related stuff.
No, I swear! I really do have a dental appointment that night!
St. Materialista
The patron saint of perfect gift giving.
I sincerely have always wanted this CD.
WOW! A GAME SPHERE!
This tip is exactly right amount. Is gratifying, but not shaming.
St. Calorus
The patron saint of eating, drinking, and being merry without blowing up like a complete house.
Of course I'll have another slice of that bûche de Noël!
It's only the BEST THING I'VE EVER TASTED IN MY LIFE!!!
R. Chst



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PROFILES

THE MIND'S EYE

The merciless originality of Jasper Johns.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

The artist Jasper Johns lives alone in a large gray fieldstone house in northwestern Connecticut. Built in the nineteenth century, the house stands on a hillside overlooking a hundred and thirty acres of meadows and woods and a distant lake, and from the outside it has a staid and formal aspect. Inside, Johns has opened it up and cleared away most of the period décor, leaving a suite of sparsely furnished, uncluttered spaces, where he has placed works by artists he admires. In the living room, a small oil painting by Cézanne, a version of the famous image of a male "Bather with Outstretched Arms," hangs over the fireplace. Twelve framed Cézanne drawings rest on shelves in a nearby bookcase. A large freestanding sculpture made of bent and twisted auto-body parts, by Johns's contemporary John Chamberlain, occupies one corner of the room, and a stack of Andy Warhol's Heinz cartons serves as a side table for one of the two pale-gray armchairs. On a long table against the far wall, five Jomon pots (rare, prehistoric Japanese ceramics) group companionably at the far end. "I always wanted five of them," Johns says. "And now I have five."

Johns, at seventy-six, is an imposing presence. Just over six feet tall, with thinning white hair and considerable bulk through the chest and shoulders, he projects a concentrated self-assurance that is less armored than it used to be. Twice before, during the forty years we have known each other, I have proposed writing about him for this magazine; both times he said he would think about it, and then, a week or so later, he tactfully declined. Recently I asked him again, and this time he said that he was willing to try, with the understanding "that it might be a failure." I knew what he meant. Johns has never been an easy interview. Although he makes a serious effort to answer most questions about his work, attempts to probe into meaning or interpretation annoy him. He prefers to talk about how a work was made, not why, and his answers tend to be literal, succinct, and often opaque. This does not encourage personal revelations. As the art critic Vivien Raynor once wrote, in *Artnews*, "He has a remoteness that, while very amiable, makes all questions sound vaguely coarse and irrelevant."

Johns had suggested I meet him that morning in his painting studio, in a converted coach barn about a hundred yards from the house. The studio, which occupies half the ground floor, is a big, open room with a high ceiling and immense sliding doors at either end. There are several worktables, with paints and art supplies neatly laid out. On the wall just to the right of the entrance is a very small, very crude oil sketch by Cézanne of a reclining nude woman. To the left of this door, on the wall and clustered on two shelves, is a miscellany of disparate objects that Johns likes, or that people have sent him because they think he would like them: two versions of Marcel Duchamp's self-portrait in profile; a geode with water trapped inside it; a tiny Joseph Cornell box; four shadow-box frames containing, respectively, a sea horse, a praying mantis, a large beetle, and a tarantula; some children's drawings; a micro-teapot made from a single penny; several novelty toys, two of which feature an outhouse with a small boy inside who pees on you when you open the door—Johns demonstrated one of them for me.

Four recent paintings hung on the back wall. All four were painted in a pattern of irregular abstract shapes that

PHOTOGRAPH BY IRVING PENN

Jasper Johns, New York, 2006. Johns claims indifference to critics: "I always find it interesting that they have anything to say, because I find it difficult to say much."

echoed the "flagstone" motif Johns had used extensively in the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies. Three of them were in muted colors, and the fourth was predominantly gray, a color whose tonal complexities have figured prominently in Johns's work throughout his career. This one's title, he said, was "Beckett." When I asked why, he told about working with Samuel Beckett on a book, in 1976, with writings by Beckett and images by Johns—flagstone images, and also the tight clusters of short, diagonal "crosshatch" brushstrokes that he was using in many of his pictures then. "Sam was looking at some etchings I had made," Johns said. "He held them up very close to his face—he had bad eyesight—and then he said, 'I'll tell you what I see. Here'—pointing to the crosshatching—'I see you try all these paths in different directions, but, no matter where you go, you come up against this wall.'" I asked him whether Beckett's remark, with its ring of comic futility, might have had to do more with Beckett than with Johns. "Don't you think that all of our interpretations of other people's work sound like us?" he said, laughing. "That's what's interesting—you get to see yourself another way."

Later, we walked over to the main house for lunch. On weekdays, Johns has lunch with his staff—his studio assistant, James Meyer; John Lund, who runs a fully equipped print studio that occupies the other half of the building's ground floor; Sarah Taggart, his longtime secretary and personal assistant; and Taggart's aide, Lynn Kearcher. On this Sunday in May, the staff was absent, but Johns's chef had prepared lunch, which was precisely laid out on a side table, on antique Japanese plates—seafood salad, corn salad, asparagus, wild rice, fresh bread, and sautéed morels, gathered that morning from a spot that Johns pointed out to me, under an oak tree, where they appear at this time every year. There were three paintings in the dining room, each with a wall to itself. A small, metallic image of the American flag (the subject of Johns's 1954 breakthrough work) hung over the fireplace—it is actually a cast, in silver, of a collage that Johns made for Robert Rauschenberg in the early nineteen-sixties. One of Cy Twombly's large "blackboard" paintings, with white scribbled lines on a black background, occupied a side wall, and a 1963 silk-screen painting by Rauschenberg, called "Cove," was on the wall facing the Johns flag.

During lunch, I started to ask him about what had struck me, in the studio, as a return to his "abstract period" of the nineteen-seventies, but he cut me short. "What are you talking about?" he said. I said I was referring to the flagstone and the crosshatch motifs. "If you consider that abstraction," Johns said. "Those stupid marks." Most people do, I said. "Well, I don't know that I think of my other work as representational," he said. "This is an idea that isn't mine. If I meet someone I don't know, someone slightly naïve, and they ask me what I do, I say I'm a painter, and if they ask what kind of a painter, I say an abstract painter. It's a way to get out of saying anything else. Or I just say I'm a modern artist. But I don't know what kind of an artist I am."

Jasper Johns's first solo exhibition, at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958, established him as an artist of great originality and singular importance. Alfred Barr, the Museum of Modern Art's director, came in, stayed for an hour, and bought three paintings for the museum, a virtually unprecedented vote of confidence for a previously unknown painter who was still in his twenties.

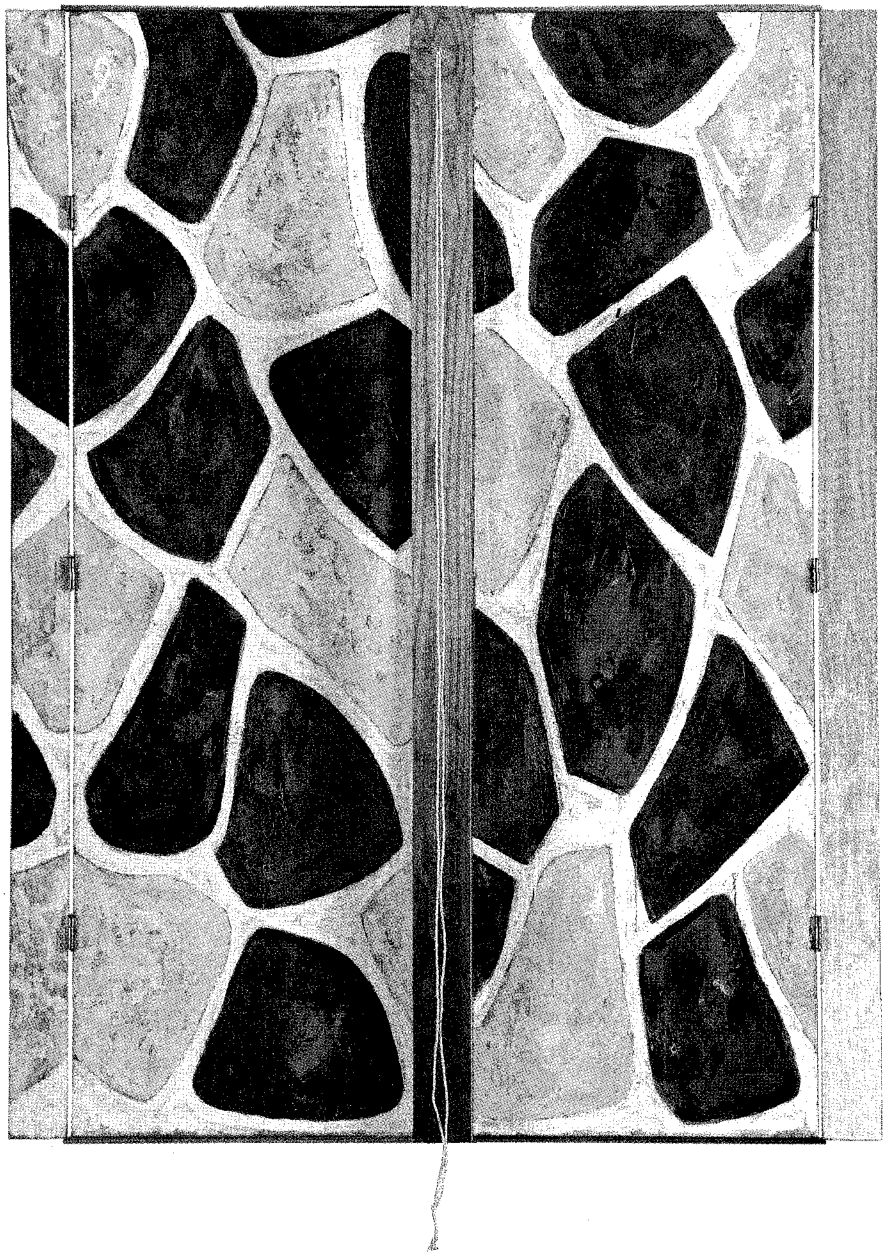
Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, who had an intense personal and professional relationship from 1954 to 1961, are often said to have broken the dominance of the Abstract Expressionist style and opened up new approaches and new subject matter. These included, in Johns's case, figurative paintings of targets, flags, numerals, and letters of the alphabet. Johns's seductively painted renderings of these "things the mind already knows," as he put it, and Rauschenberg's wildly inventive collages and "combines" (part painting and part sculpture), which brought the whole, promiscuous image bank of contemporary American experience into art-making, set the stage for Pop art, minimalism, and many subsequent developments. Although Rauschenberg's reputation has fluctuated widely, Johns's remained at an exalted level for three decades. (As late as 1988, the *Times* critic Michael Brenson cited his standing in Europe as "the greatest American artist since Jackson Pollock.") The first stirrings of discontent surfaced over "The Seasons," a suite of four large paintings done in 1985 and 1986, in which autobiographical references and deliberate borrowings from Picasso made some critics suspect that the artist was losing his merciless originality. Critical dissent has slowly gathered momentum since then, fuelled by Johns's increasing tendency to fill his paintings with cryptic, puzzle-like images, and with details taken from pictures by other artists, from Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece to the forgotten W. E. Hill's 1915 drawing of a woman's head which, depending on how you view it, can be either a pretty young Gibson girl or a forbidding hag in a head scarf. The complaints reached a fairly shrill pitch during his show at the Matthew Marks Gallery last year, when several former enthusiasts attacked what Michael Kimmelman, in the *Times*, called Johns's "ever more preening and self-mythologizing brands of obscurity." Other critics had similar reactions. Peter Schjeldahl, in a review in this magazine, wrote that Johns had, in his new work, "attempted to retreat behind a curtain of hermetic, teasingly simple formats. The result is undernourished and overthought."

When intelligent critics dismiss the current work of an artist who has been as extravagantly admired as Johns has, it is often because the work does not coincide with their expectations. (For a while in the nineteen-seventies, the rap on Picasso was that he had done nothing major since "Guernica," in 1937.) The recent Johns criticism has been consistent and troubling, nevertheless. I have had my own feelings of frustration with what has sometimes seemed like Johns's willful oscillation between pulling me in and shutting me out. The large painted maps of the United States that he did in the nineteen-sixties, one in bravura, Abstract Expressionist style and primary colors, another in subtly muted, mostly gray tones, struck me as the most beautiful works I had seen by a living artist—until the "Usuyuki" series of crosshatch paintings that he did fifteen years later. (The Japanese word *usuyuki*, which refers to a light snow, was an apt verbal equivalent to these works, whose exquisite colors seemed to lie just beneath the surface.) The increasing complexity and the hidden references in his work of the eighties and nineties never made me think that the artist was playing trivial games, but some of the paintings did seem clotted and hermetic. Over time, though, I have come to think that Johns is following the only course available to him. He believes in Duchamp's theory that the artist sets in motion a creative process that the spectators must complete, and the current disconnect may indeed turn out to be a failure on his part. My guess, though, is that the work will hold up and the criticism will not.

Again and again in his career, he has thwarted critical expectations by abruptly changing the way he paints. The first major shift occurred immediately following his début show at Leo Castelli's. Abandoning the deadpan reticence and muted palette of his targets and numbers, he began painting splashy, colorful, mostly abstract canvases that carried echoes of Willem de Kooning's loose-elbow style, canvases in which swatches of a bright primary color were identified, confusingly, by the stencilled name of another color. A very different sensibility marked the series of dark, somewhat morbid paintings and drawings that he did in 1961-63, soon after a bitter falling-out with Rauschenberg; their titles ("No," "Liar," "Fool's House," "Painting Bitten by a Man," "Diver") suggested, to the multiplying herd of Johns's explicators, that personal emotions had invaded the work of an artist whose previous approach had rigorously ruled them out. After the predominantly abstract flagstone and hatch-mark paintings in the seventies, recognizable images returned in 1979—real knives and forks attached to the picture frame in some paintings, three-dimensional plaster casts of body parts in others, painted images of skulls and male and female genitals in the "Tantric Detail" series. We also began to see more and more direct borrowings from older artists, borrowings that took on, in Johns's cerebral reworking, a strange duality. When Picasso reworked Velázquez, Delacroix, and other Old Masters, he seemed to be devouring them, appropriating and digesting for his own use their mysterious essence. Johns's motive is more like compulsive curiosity: Why does this image carry meaning, and would it still do so if I used it in this way?

Through all the stylistic variations in Johns's work over the decades, what didn't change was his painterly touch. In whatever medium he used—oil paint, encaustic (a nearly extinct technique, which Johns rediscovered in an art book, of mixing pigment with hot wax), charcoal, pencil, crayon, watercolor, lithography, etching, and so forth—the physical skill he brought to its application carried an almost erotic charge. "Looking closely helps," his friend John Cage, the composer, wrote in an early essay on Johns, "though the paint is applied so sensually that there is the danger of falling in love."

Even his detractors still pay perfunctory tribute to the way he handles paint. It's the subject matter that riles them. They want to know what, exactly, is the point of these bizarre and unrelated images in his work of the past two decades: the schematic floor plan of his grandfather's house in Allendale, South Carolina; the little stick figures wielding paintbrushes; the shadowy child with superimposed geometric forms; the spiral galaxy; the weirdly distorted female face from Picasso's "Straw Hat with Blue Leaf." Aside from the skill involved, what do these images have to do with anything beyond Johns's all-too-private conceits and preoccupations? As Kimmelman wrote in 1991, "His cur-



In his most recent painting—"Untitled" (2006)—Johns revisits his "flagstone" motif.

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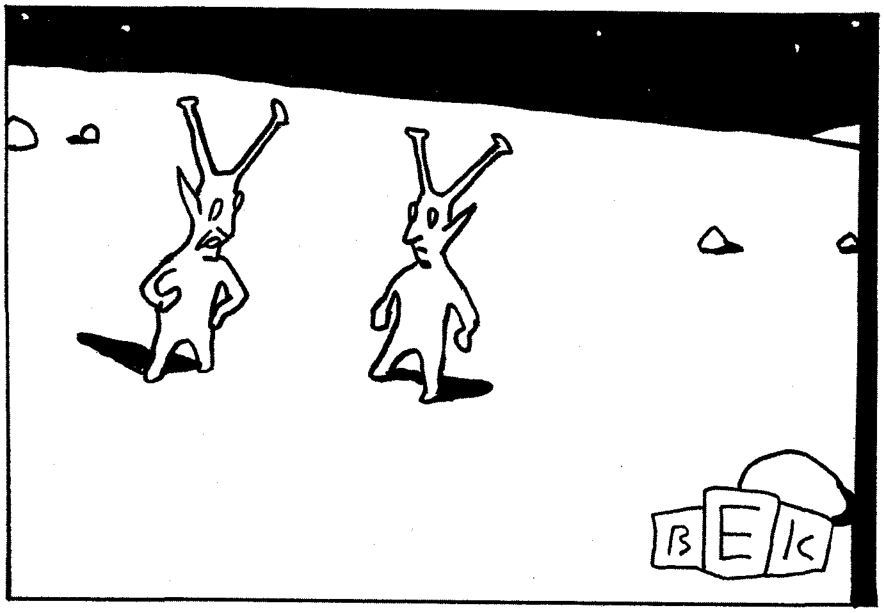
rent drawings and paintings seem increasingly based on a code that demands to be broken but to which he alone holds the key." But why should Johns be denied the use of unexplained images? The mysterious, unidentifiable shape near the center of Matisse's "The Moroccans" does not keep it from being considered one of the greatest pictures in the Museum of Modern Art.

Impatient with all the critical spadework that has gone into decoding his images, Johns unveiled a new puzzle in a 1990 painting called "Green Angel," a roughly rectangular shape that has appeared in several subsequent works; when asked about it, he said that he was not going to reveal the source. Baffled reviewers took to calling it "a buffalo in a blanket." This might suggest that the artist is indeed playing games with his viewers, but to think that, you would have to believe in the kind of intentional working process that he has always made clear he does not follow. For Johns, as for most of the great modern artists, a picture is not a statement, nor does it emerge from a preconceived plan. Every brushstroke, even the first, is a response to something that has occurred before, on the canvas or in the artist's mind or memory, and will influence what happens next. Johns would like viewers to construct their own meanings from his pictures. With "Green Angel," as he explained to me during another visit to his Connecticut studio, "the idea was not to create a mystery about the derivation of an image but to free the image from that other thing"—its previous association. "I was trying to find out something about how our minds and eyes work, and what creates a new or original image."

I asked him what had triggered his use of autobiographical references in "The Seasons" and later paintings. He was silent for some time, frowning slightly—enough to make me think he was irritated. "I don't know how to answer you," he said at length. "But I'll try. When you're painting, you have a central thought that pulls in various kinds of details, and that's the way you make the painting. You go in a direction, and you gather up whatever you need to move that way. It's not necessarily that you have planned to make a picture like this. It's not 'Well, now let's say something about myself.' You're saying, 'Now let me make another painting.'"

I reminded him of his early statements about not wanting his work to be about himself, his life, or his feelings. "Well," he replied, "one realizes that it's a failure, that effort. It produces something, it's an attitude which allows you to filter certain things, and gives the work a direction, or the sense of a direction. As other things are filtered or allowed in, you get a different kind of image. One would like to control that, but it is more or less a hopeless procedure." In other words, I suggested, the autobiographical elements were not important in themselves—they just happened to be what he was working with at a certain point. "That's what I think," he said.



"When you add up how much it costs for fuel, supplies, and getting a sitter, it doesn't seem worth it to invade Earth."

Johns's work will be featured next year in two major museum exhibitions—"Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955-1965," at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C. (opening January 28th), and "Jasper Johns: Gray," a survey of his gray paintings over several decades, which opens at the Art Institute of Chicago next November, and then travels to the Metropolitan Museum here. Last spring, I asked Jeffrey Weiss, the curator of the National Gallery show, how he felt about the recent critical backlash against Johns. "That's a hard thing to account for," he said, "except to say that art has changed so much, and critical expectations have changed as well. His language is more closely attached to the distant past than to what's being done now." It is true that not many young artists today seem influenced by Johns, in the way that so many used to be in the nineteen-sixties, and so many are still influenced by Rauschenberg and Warhol. Johns has become like an Old Master—but one whose work continues to change, double back on itself, contradict expectations, and disturb. On my last visit to Connecticut, in October, Johns brought out a small flagstone painting that he had finished just the day before. About a quarter the size of "Beckett," it was much more vivid: the flagstones were red, yellow, and blue, on a white ground. The interaction of color and shape was remarkably active. The little picture had a brilliance and clarity that I had not seen in Johns's work for a long time, or maybe ever.

Johns appears to be indifferent to the recent attacks. "Usually I have read what critics say," he told me last spring. "I always find it interesting that they have anything to say, because I find it difficult to say much, and certainly not to sum things up. I don't hold on to what they've said, and more recently I pay less attention." He was silent for several moments, looking off into the distance, as though considering what he had just said. "Of course," he added, "artists can torture themselves over almost anything." I asked him what were some of the things he tortured himself about. "I don't think I want to tell you!" he said, with a burst of laughter.

Johns was not always so unmoved by criticism. Early in his career, he made a wicked little sculpture called "The Critic Sees II." It consists of a pair of eyeglasses embedded in what looks like a block of lead. (The block is actually plaster, covered with a gray compound called Sculpmetal.) Behind each lens, instead of an eye, there is an open, speaking mouth.

One day in the nineteen-seventies, the art dealer Irving Blum invited Jasper Johns to lunch at an expensive uptown restaurant. During the meal, Johns asked what the lunch was about. Blum explained: he knew an important collector who wanted very much to buy Johns's "White Flag," a 1955 painting that Johns still owned. The collector would pay big for it, Blum said—up to two million dollars. Johns, whose prices were extremely high by then, but not that high, smiled and changed the subject. Dessert and coffee arrived. Blum called for the check. As they were saying goodbye, he ventured, "So, Jasper, what do you think of my proposal?" Smiling broadly this time, Johns said, "Irving, it's not worth it."

For a long time now, the prices paid for Johns's work have been the gold standard for contemporary art. His "False Start" broke the auction record for work by a living artist when Sotheby's sold it for seventeen million dollars in 1988; last month, it brought eighty million in a private sale. Johns gets nothing from these secondary-market resales, but they help to boost the market for his new work, whose prices are unaffected by the critical backlash. Johns, who stayed with the Castelli gallery until Leo Castelli's death, in 1999, no longer needs a primary dealer. He produces very few paintings in any given year—rarely more than four or five, some years none at all—and he tries to hold on to at least one work from every show. Occasionally he sells something directly out of the studio, or through Matthew Marks or Barbara Castelli, Leo's widow, who has a small gallery on the Upper East Side. There is a long list of people waiting to buy anything he does, at several million dollars for a painting, upward of five hundred thousand for a new drawing, and up to fifty thousand for a print. This enables him to live exceedingly comfortably. In addition to the property in Connecticut, he has a house on St. Martin, in the Caribbean, where he spends the winter, and he is thinking about renovating a space in a downtown Manhattan building that he co-owns with a friend. (Johns used to own Gypsy Rose Lee's former town house, on East Sixty-third Street, but he sold it several years ago; now he wants a place to stay when he is obliged to come in from the country for an opening or a dinner party.) Wherever he is, he lives in what I think of as a kind of monastic luxury. Johns's most visible extravagance, apart from his real-estate holdings, is the work of other artists, which he buys at auction or through private sales or exchanges. In addition to the examples already mentioned, he owns works by Degas, Picasso, Matisse, Magritte, Picabia, Schwitters, Warhol, de Kooning, Juan Gris, Barnett Newman, Eric Fischl, Brice Marden, Frank Stella, as well as many more works by Rauschenberg. Unlike some of these artists, Johns has managed, through rigorous refusals and the protective loyalty of a few close friends, to avoid becoming an art star. Outside the art world, few people know him by sight.

This is not to say that he doesn't appreciate his success. "I've been very fortunate to have a large enough number of people interested in my work over a long time," he said to me. "The generous reception it's had has allowed me to be much more—free in my decisions. More obstinate. I feel I have benefitted from the kind of attention I've had, rather than being hampered by it." There was another long pause. Then he said, "In fact, I think I've been treated so well that I'm overly comfortable."

Jasper Johns, who was born in 1930, grew up in rural South Carolina. His parents divorced when he was two or three, and he was sent to live with his paternal grandfather, a well-to-do Baptist farmer, who had a much younger second wife and a large house in Allendale, in the southwestern part of the state. His grandfather died in 1939, and Johns spent the next year living with his mother and her second husband and their two children, in Columbia, the state capital. That summer, when he was ten, he was sent to visit his father's sister, Gladys, who lived on Lake Murray, about eighty miles north of Allendale. "It wasn't a town," Johns recalls, "it was an area that people called the Corner. At the end of the summer, I was informed that I was to stay there." He stayed six years. For the first three years, he went to a one-room schoolhouse, where his aunt Gladys taught all the grades. There were only two other children in Johns's class; he loved learning how to diagram sentences, which his aunt taught "with passion." When the time came to go to high school, he commuted by bus to the town of Batesburg. After tenth grade, he moved in again with his mother and stepfather, who had relocated to Sumter, about forty miles east of Columbia. "Most of the time," he said, "wherever I lived, I felt like a guest."

Johns's paternal grandmother, who died before he was born, had been an amateur artist, and her paintings—scenes from nature, copied (he suspects) from other sources and hanging in the Allendale house where he grew up—were the first art works he saw. "I think I always wanted to make art, as far back as I can remember," he told me. "What I find curious is that I didn't train myself. It was simply a kind of blank ambition." Although he once said that he started drawing at the age of three "and never stopped," he also insists that he never really learned to draw, and still has no facility for it. In 1948, he entered the University of South Carolina, in Columbia. "I had no interest in most subjects," he recalls. "I had no sense of history, so I didn't do terribly well. But I found the art classes very interesting, and by the beginning of my second year—maybe the second half of the first year—I stopped studying and took only art classes." One of his teachers there, Catharine Phillips Rembert, who had studied with Hans Hofmann and knew the New York art scene, became a close friend and mentor. She invited him to dinner at her house almost every night. (Her dining table, which Johns bought from her a few years ago and enlarged, is now his dining table in Connecticut.) Rembert talked to him about contemporary art and artists, and told him that

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he should go to New York. In the winter of his second year of college, he did so, and enrolled at the Parsons School of Design. He soon ran out of money. He was offered a scholarship, but was told that he didn't deserve one: the Parsons administrator said she was only offering it because of her friendship with Catharine Rembert. In that case, Johns said, he couldn't accept it. He quit Parsons and got a job as a messenger. He took and passed the examination for the art school at Cooper Union, which was free, but he did not enroll there. In the spring of 1951, he was drafted into the Army.

The Korean War was in its first year then, and Johns, who was trained as a heavy-weapons infantryman, expected to go to Korea, but after a year and a half of running an art-exhibition program for soldiers at Fort Jackson, in South Carolina, he was assigned to a Special Services unit in Sendai, Japan, about two hundred miles north of Tokyo. His duties—printing movie schedules, designing posters on the perils of venereal disease—were not onerous, and in his time off he initiated what became a lifelong interest in Japanese culture. He visited Kyoto's temples and gardens, attended Kabuki performances, and went to a Surrealist-inspired exhibition in Tokyo where he remembers seeing an elephant's foot pinning a woman's glove to a pedestal. After his discharge from the Army, in 1953, he moved back to New York and spent one day at Hunter College, which he could attend on the G.I. Bill of Rights. He went to an English literature class on "Beowulf"—"where the teacher was talking about the mead hall"; a French class in which he couldn't understand a word anyone said; and an art class whose imposing, red-haired female teacher praised his "marvellous line quality." Returning to his railroad apartment on East Eighty-third Street that evening, he passed out on the street (the effects of a virus, he surmises), stayed in bed for several days, and decided that the Hunter experience was not worth pursuing.

Most of the work Johns had done up to this point no longer exists; he destroyed it in 1954. Some years ago, Johns told me that his work before then "was mainly negative, concerned with not doing anything that had been done before," but last summer he said he couldn't remember what it was like. He worked as a night clerk at the Marboro bookstore, on West Fifty-seventh Street. Walking home after work in late 1953 or early 1954, he saw someone he knew, the writer Suzi Gablik, who was with two other people on the corner of Fifty-seventh and Madison. Gablik introduced him to her friends, one of whom was Robert Rauschenberg.

"Bob was the first real artist I had any contact with," Johns told me a couple of years ago. "You could say that I learned what an artist was from watching him, on the practical level." For seven years, beginning in the summer of 1954, when Johns moved to a downtown industrial-loft studio on Pearl Street, they saw each other's work almost every day. Rauschenberg was living a few blocks away, on Fulton Street; the following summer, he moved to the floor above Johns on Pearl. "For a number of years," Johns said, "we were the main audience for each other's work."

Rauschenberg, who was five years older than Johns, had grown up in Port Arthur, Texas. He'd had one-man shows in New York and knew many of the city's artists, but his recent work—fetish-like objects made from scrap materials, collages whose elements included newspaper, mirrors, fabric, gold leaf, or things he picked up on the street—had found few buyers, and for several years after he met Johns no gallery wanted to show it. He and Johns, who had quit his job at Marboro, supported themselves by designing window displays for Tiffany's and Bonwit's; Gene Moore, the display director for both stores, paid them his top fee of five hundred dollars a job, which they could live on for three months.

Johns's breakthrough had come when he dreamed that he was painting the American flag. The next day, he did paint it—not a painting *of* the flag but the flag itself, stars and stripes filling the canvas from edge to edge. This led to the targets, and the letters and the numbers, and the maps of the United States. The map idea came from Rauschenberg, who one day brought home a cheap outline map of the states and gave it to Johns.

BENOÎT VAN INNIS

They traded ideas as well as pictures, and occasionally tried their hand at each other's work. "I did a couple of gold-leaf paintings," Johns once told me, when I was interviewing him for an article about Rauschenberg. "And I did one in the style of his painting 'Rebus.' I thought I understood what went into his pictures, but my work wasn't convincing." Rauschenberg told me in 1963 that he had been "envious of Jasper's encaustic, but too respectful to touch it, except once. He was painting one of the large flags. It smelled so delicious, all those aromatic bubbling waxes. I begged him to let me do one stripe, and he finally said all right, one. I stared at the painting, savoring the moment, and then I dipped a brush in the red wax and made a stroke—in the middle of a white stripe! Oops! Needless to say, I didn't ask him again." A few years later, after hearing of de Kooning's crack about Leo Castelli's salesmanship ("That son-of-a-bitch; you could give him two beer cans and he could sell them"), Rauschenberg was trying to work two crumpled beer cans into one of his combines. "You should let me use that," Johns said to him, and Rauschenberg agreed. The result was Johns's "Painted Bronze," a 1960 sculpture of two cast bronze, meticulously painted replicas of Ballantine Ale cans.

In those long-ago interviews, you get a sense of how the two artists felt about each other. "Jasper was soft, beautiful, lean, and poetic," Rauschenberg said in 1963. "He looked almost ill—I guess that's what I mean by poetic. . . . He read a lot, and he wrote poetry. Jasper would read Hart Crane to me in the studio. I loved it—I just didn't have the patience to read it myself." And Johns, around the same time: "I felt kin to him. He seemed amazingly naïve, but he functioned in ways that I couldn't. Bob assumed that other people would support what he did. I assumed I would have to do it in spite of other people."

Their closest friends in those years were John Cage and Merce Cunningham, the modern-dance choreographer,

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both of whom Rauschenberg had studied with in 1952 at Black Mountain College. Rauschenberg and Johns became closely involved with the activities of Cunningham's dance company. They made sets and costumes, and Rauschenberg acted as the company's lighting designer and eventually as Cunningham's artistic adviser, a role Johns took over in the late nineteen-sixties. (The Foundation for Contemporary Arts, a private grant-making agency that Johns and Cage established in 1963, and that Johns still oversees, grew out of a fund-raising effort for the Cunningham company.) The four men shared certain ideas and ambitions which would soon become much more influential than they were then—ideas of an art based not on self-expression or heroic individualism or some concept of the sublime but on a field of aesthetic possibilities reachable through nontraditional means such as chance, experimentation, and the unapologetic embrace of everyday experience. Cage, who was a few years older than the others, had come to these notions intellectually, through his delvings into modern literature, Zen Buddhism, Hindu philosophy, and the work and thought of Duchamp. Each of the others had arrived on his own, by different routes, but they found reassurance in Cage, who was a natural teacher and a world-class optimist. "It had great meaning for me that John was so organized in his thinking," Johns recalled, in one of our conversations. "Although I was very attentive, I would say I was not a good student. John didn't like to argue. I like to argue, and that annoyed him tremendously."

A few years after Johns and Rauschenberg's unhappy parting, in 1961, Cage talked to me about the relationship between them. "We called them the Southern renaissance," he said. "Their personalities were so very different—Jasper was much quieter in those days—but often a kind of electricity seemed to pass between them, striking sparks that lit up any discussion. I remember thinking I didn't need to have any other friends. Their breakup seemed to me a very great deprivation."

One day last spring, I watched Jasper Johns carefully unwrap a large black-and-white lithograph. He had made it that week. Brushy abstract markings ran down one side of the sheet, opposite more or less untouched areas of white paper, and near the bottom was a narrow horizontal shape in a diamond pattern that suggested one of Picasso's Harlequin figures. The print was based on two large paintings, called "Pyre" and "Pyre 2," which Johns had done in 2003, and which would shortly make their first public appearance in the current "Picasso and American Art" exhibition at the Whitney Museum.

This is how Johns often works. He makes a painting, and afterward (rarely before) he may make any number of drawings and/or graphic works in which different aspects of the painting are added to, omitted, or altered. Prints are as important to his working process as drawings; they allow him to explore the endless possibilities he is able to find in any visual motif. "I prefer work that appears to come out of a changing focus," he said in a 1964 interview—"not just one relationship or even a number of them but constantly changing and shifting relationships to things in terms of focus." This sense of a shifting focus is one of the things he responds to in the work of Cézanne, whose "synesthetic quality," as he once remarked, "makes looking equivalent to touching." I inquired about the title, "Pyre." Did it imply a funeral? "I don't think so," he said.

Against my better judgment, I asked whether the thought of death had been on his mind when he made the paintings. "I don't mean to scorn what you're saying," Johns said carefully. "Such things do come into play, but I think to focus on them would be a mistake."

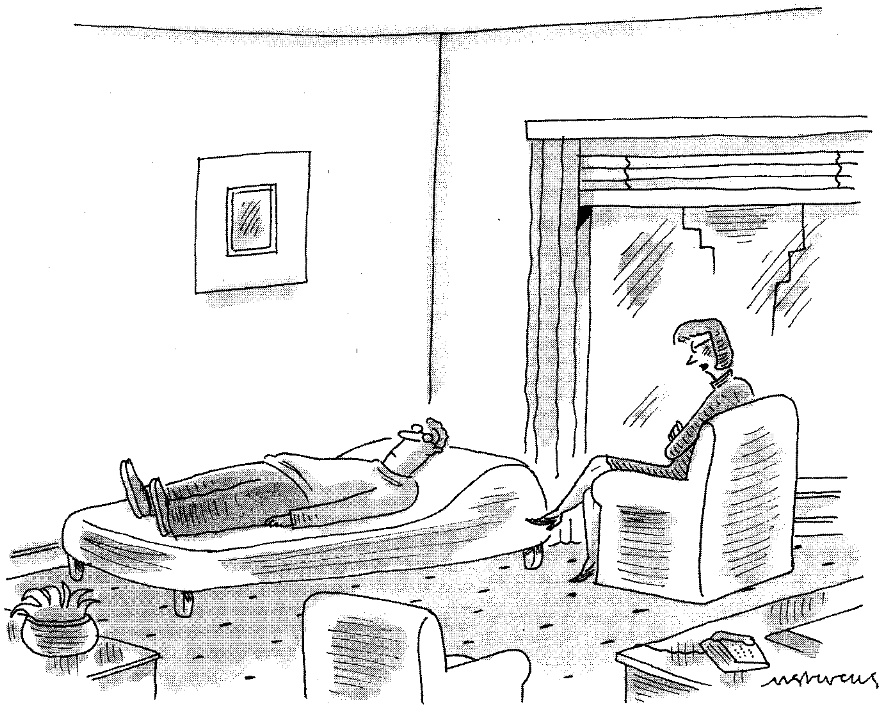
There is a common misperception about Johns that he is a secretive and melancholy person. He enjoys many things in his life—food, books, plants of all kinds, conversation, friendships. Although his work requires a certain degree of isolation and solitude, which he takes care to provide for himself, he can be extremely good company. He is witty, well-read, curious, and interested in what others think, although he doesn't hesitate to argue with it.

"Jasper is good for me," Susan Sontag wrote in her journal in 1966, when they were seeing a lot of each other. "He makes it feel natural + good + right to be crazy . . . to question everything." Johns told me that he had loved talking with Sontag. "She was certainly lively in her thought, and in her willingness to encounter things. I would go with her occasionally to literary gatherings, with people like Lionel Trilling. She seemed to think my presence would be interesting to everyone else, although I think they couldn't understand what they were supposed to find interesting about me." His friendship with Sontag may have had something to do with his agreeing to appear, last December, one year after Sontag died, in a *Vogue* fashion shoot by her longtime companion, the photographer Annie Leibovitz. The theme was

"The Wizard of Oz," with Keira Knightley as Dorothy (in frocks that L. Frank Baum could not have envisaged), and a gaggle of contemporary artists as the other characters. To the astonishment of much of the art world, Johns appeared as the Cowardly Lion, sitting on a large rock, wearing a heavy overcoat and looking extremely dire. Some artists were upset by this. Johns had come to represent for them the incorruptible exception, "an example of how to lead your life without letting wealth and celebrity and fashion take over and subvert your work," as one of them said to me. This sort of reverence is probably quite boring to Johns, who sometimes goes out of his way not to be bored.

Johns began going to St. Martin in 1969. He bought a piece of land there in 1972, on the French side of the island, and had Philip Johnson, a friend, sketch out a house, which two younger architects then built. The house is a stucco rectangle with a bedroom, a bath, and Johns's studio at one end, coming off a forty-foot living room whose sliding glass doors overlook a wide lagoon. When my wife and I went down there last winter, Johns insisted on picking us up at our hotel in his tiny Renault Twingo—the roads, he indicated, were too hazardous for us to navigate on our own.

He also insisted on making dinner for us. While he busied himself in the kitchen, behind a counter at one end of the all-white living room with its cathedral ceiling, we took in the view from the covered veranda that runs the length of the house, listened to "The Magic Flute" on the stereo, and studied the room's single art work, a tall, relatively recent Johns canvas called "Bushbaby." The painting, which looked to be about six feet high by four feet wide—Johns didn't know the exact dimensions—was divided lengthwise in three sections: Harlequin-patterned form on the right, gray encaustic brushwork in the center, and colored circles on the left. Attached to the frame were two tall wooden slats, upright and overlapping, with a length of string hanging down from one of them. The string moved gently in the breeze coming through the sliding doors. Like the series of "catenary" paintings in his 2005 New York show—so called because each contains a length of string whose ends are attached loosely at two points, forming what mathematicians call a catenary curve—this one was empty of recognizable images. To me, it looked very quiet and meditative. I asked why it was called "Bushbaby." Johns said that he thought bush babies were small nocturnal animals found in Africa, animals "with monkey-like features and very large eyes." He said that this painting was a new version of an earlier, smaller one with the same title. But why the title? "It's a personal association," he said.



"Next week we'll try sitting in a chair."

The self-imposed solitude at the core of Johns's life is more apparent in St. Martin. James Meyer, his studio assistant in Connecticut, comes down at the start of Johns's stay each year, which usually lasts from just before Christmas to March; he helps Johns set up the studio, stretch canvases, and so forth, but then he leaves, and Johns is alone in the house. Friends come for brief visits—he has a guest house—but you sense that he is perfectly comfortable with no one around. Although he keeps to no regular schedule, he gets up early and usually works for several hours every day. For recreation, he swims in his pool, or he gardens. The round, slatted-wood table in the living room is piled with books that people have sent him: "Kafka on the Shore," by Haruki Murakami; "The Liberal Imagination," by Lionel Trilling; "The Complete Poems of Ted Berrigan"; "Cézanne and the Eternal Feminine," by Wayne Anderson. He often wakes during the night and reads.

Dinner was fricassee of chicken and vegetables, served in its own broth, with couscous, red wine, and salad from the garden. Johns drank water. He hasn't touched alcohol for the last year. In November, 2005, he was driving two other people home from a Thanksgiving dinner in Connecticut when his car skidded out of control on an iced-over hill and hit a utility pole. The other people were not seriously hurt, but Johns broke several ribs.

I asked him if he had seen the recent show of Rauschenberg's work from 1954 to 1964, the influential combines, which opened last December at the Metropolitan Museum. (I knew that he had not been to the opening; although Rauschenberg and Johns can't help running into each other occasionally, they tend to avoid doing so.) Johns had gone before the show opened. "My first thought was that it was wonderful," he said. "Next thought was that the unfortunate thing about those early works is that they take on a quality of being relics. Originally, they were fresh, immediate, not precious—things apt to be overlooked, picked up here and there, like a minute ago. Maybe that's not important—maybe all work goes through this kind of thing."

Johns is somewhat more willing than Rauschenberg, these days, to discuss their early relationship, but the curtain lifts only so far. At dinner that night, when I mentioned Cage's comment about not needing any other friends, Johns nodded, and said, "Well, for a while the four of us were a very interesting group—at least to ourselves—because there was complete and open communication, and different levels of experience and knowledge. I've certainly never experienced anything like that before or since."

I also brought up something Cage had written in his essay on Johns, that the atmosphere of his work was heavy rather than light, and that this was "something he knows and regrets." "I haven't read that piece in years," Johns said. "I'm not sure what he meant, but I think it's fair. There is a kind of—hesitation, or feedback, in my work that would give it the sense of heaviness rather than lightness. It doesn't just move forward gracefully." And would he prefer it if his work didn't have this heaviness? "Oh, I would. I think anyone would prefer to move ahead in a cheerful way, without hesitation. One would like to have a life that caused no confusion." He glanced across at my wife and added, mischievously, "Not you, Dodie!" Starting to laugh, Johns said, "No, the basic question here is whether you think life is a wonderful condition, or not. I don't, particularly. Amazingly enough, it's not entirely to my liking."

The next day, we had lunch at the Claude Mini-Club in Marigot, a restaurant where Johns often goes by himself. He wore a white shirt, baggy white pants, and sandals. The Mini-Club is open on three sides, with terrible murals and a good view of the harbor. The waiters all knew him, but nobody else did. At lunch, I had hoped to get him talking about Duchamp. Of all the artists Johns has learned from or made use of over the years, Duchamp seems to be the closest to him in spirit. What Johns wrote in a brief memorial statement on Duchamp, in 1968, that he had moved his art "into a field where language, thought, and vision act upon one another," applies just as well to his own work, and clear references to Duchamp's ideas and images run like a leitmotif through Johns's paintings, drawings, and prints. On this occasion, I reminded him of something else he had written about Duchamp, that "it may be a great work of his to have brought doubt into the air that surrounds art." At first Johns said that he didn't remember what he had meant by that, but then he mentioned the readymades—common, manufactured objects such as a snow shovel or a bottle-drying rack, which Duchamp had elevated to the status of art simply by choosing and signing them. "You don't know what they are," Johns said, "and I would say he didn't, either. He was not concerned with knowing what they were. He did it out of good will, and a feeling of wit and optimism, but basically they convey a kind of pessimism, or what I would call doubt. You could say they became expressions of a fact of life." Such as the fact that there can never be a valid definition of art, as Duchamp always maintained? "Well," Johns said, "there can't be a permanent definition of anything, it seems."

Johns and Rauschenberg met Duchamp in 1959. They both made paintings in homage to him soon afterward, but Johns has always made it clear that they saw Duchamp and his wife, Alexina (called Teeny), no more than a dozen times in all, and that he, Johns, would certainly never have presumed to talk about art or ideas with Duchamp. He particularly treasures a memory of the night in 1959 when he and Rauschenberg and Duchamp and Teeny had Christmas dinner together in Chinatown. During the meal, Duchamp said he was not happy with his own replies to a recent interviewer, who had asked him why he quit painting. (Duchamp's last painting on canvas was dated 1918.) As Johns remembers it, Duchamp had told the interviewer that it was "because of dealers and money and various reasons. Largely moralistic reasons. And then he looked up and said, 'But you know, it wasn't like that. It's like you break a leg—you didn't mean to do it.' " What Johns loved about this, I think, was Duchamp's denial of conscious intention as a ruling principle. It coincided with his own feeling that an artist does what he is helpless not to do.

Driving back from the restaurant, Johns wanted to get to a drawbridge before three o'clock—the hour when it's raised. A red light was flashing at the bridge entrance. The Twingo sailed through it. A man in some sort of uniform yelled at us. Johns shouted out the car window, "Sorry, I didn't see it," and kept on going. Caribbean justice did not descend.

At the house, he showed us around the garden and gave us iced lemongrass tea under a tiled-roof shelter overlooking the swimming pool. I asked him whether, as he grew older, there had been any changes in the way he went about his work. He was silent for some time, looking away and chewing on some ice. "I don't feel overloaded with ideas that I have to express urgently," he said. "But I don't know that I've ever felt that way." Did he think that the impulse to keep on making new work might someday run out? "Not that it might run out. I just don't feel the pressure of it now. I feel more freedom to do anything I might think to do, but my range of choices may be more limited. I'm old enough that I can see in my work things other people might not see—limitations, repetitions, states of mind that seem limited—and sometimes I have a sense of those things before, or while I'm working."

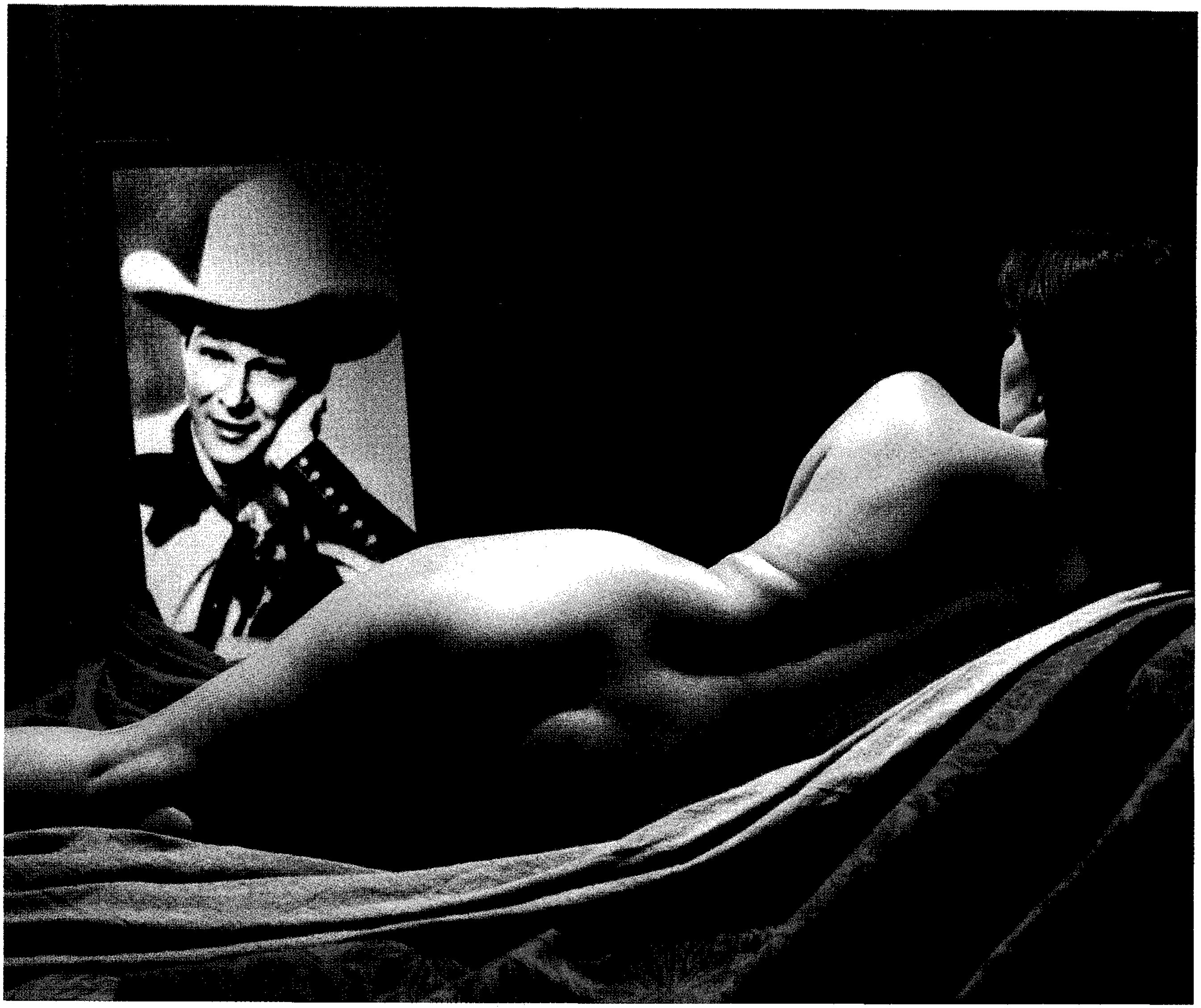
There was another long pause, punctuated by sounds of vigorous ice-crunching. "Part of working, for me," he went on, "involves anxiety. A certain amount of anxiety, or hesitation, or boredom. Frequently, I think for a long time before I do something, even though I've decided over the years that this is absolutely pointless. Actually, when one works, one comes to a solution much more quickly than when one sits and thinks. But I can't avoid it. I just sit and wonder. I don't *think* that used to happen, but I'm not sure."

A brief rain shower sent us inside. Standing at the windows, looking out over the lagoon with its surrounding green hills, Johns spoke of how much he enjoys the rain here. "It's so beautiful, like a curtain in front of the mountains," he said. "You see it coming, and you see it pass." ♦

FICTION

TANGO

BY THOMAS McGUANE



L. Raymond Hoxey bought an old mansion in Livingston, Montana, and converted the third floor into a delightful apartment with views of several mountain ranges, including the Absarokas, the Bridgers, and the Crazies. The second floor kept his print collection in archival conditions, with humidifiers and air-quality equipment. The first floor was divided into two small, comfortable apartments, one of which housed his assistant, Tessa Larionov, and the other, in the summer, a textile historian, employed by the Metropolitan Museum in New York, who was also a trout fisherman.

The year the historian died, I was still in premed and was painting houses to support myself; I moved into the vacated apartment. Acknowledging that there is a difference between being naïve and being innocent, I will say that I was entirely naïve back then. My parents lived only a few miles away, but we weren't getting along, and I needed some distance, despite the fact that my mother was sick and often ranted about God. How was I to know that she was about to die? Like most people studying medicine, I planned to get rich, but I wasn't rich yet; I was just a poor housepainter, out of work and hoping for something to come along, and, despite all other evidence, I feared that I would be one forever, packing a great wheel of color chips from one indifferent house to another. I don't mean to suggest mild insecurity here: by any reasonable standard, I was losing my mind.

Tessa Larionov was the daughter of a Russian engineer who had immigrated to the United States in 1953 and found his way to Choteau, Montana, where he set up business building bridges for the railroad. Tessa's mother was not Russian; she may have been Italian. She had met Tessa's father in New Jersey, when he first landed. Tessa was a powerfully built but attractive woman, with black hair, black eyes, and the look of a Tatar—humorous and a little dangerous. She was liked by everyone who knew her. Trained in library science, she had worked as an archivist at some very august places, including the Huntington, in San Marino, where she'd met her employer and our landlord, L. Raymond Hoxey, who had let her talk him into retiring to Montana with his rare-prints business, which she was now helping to run. Hoxey was eighty-one years old, and his arrangement with Tessa was really just a way of avoiding assisted living. She was very fond of him but had wanted to move home, and this arrangement worked for them both. Tessa was exactly thirty, still single, though she had enjoyed an active love life, leaving behind her only grateful hearts, or so she said. "They're all still crazy about me—that's why I left California," she told me. Settling down was of no interest to her; the prints were her life, and she wanted to keep her eye on Hoxey. I was twenty, but she treated me as if I were even younger—a salute to my retarded behavior, I'm sure.

My father was a pipe fitter for the Northern Pacific Railroad. (In the world of corporate takeovers, the railroad had actually changed its name several times, but Northern Pacific was the one that stayed in all our minds: it meant something; "Burlington Northern" meant nothing.) My mother was a hairdresser and, because of her big mouth, she had enemies all over southwest Montana and very few customers. As an only child, I was all but homeschooled, driven back and forth between our house and the less fashionable grade school in the area, then the local high school, where I was anonymous, never having been allowed, by my overprotective mother, to learn a sport. But I liked to fish. I'd fish anywhere there was water; I fished in a lot of ditches where there was no hope of success. I commuted to college and lived like a monk, on a small scholarship. I now understand that I was a weirdly underdeveloped human being for my age, ripe for just the sort of encounter that I had with Tessa Larionov. Even my mother noticed my immaturity; she was always telling me, "Stop staring at people!"

It was Hoxey whom I got to know first. The day I arranged to rent from him, he happened to have received several Reginald Marsh prints, of which he was very proud. I acted as if I'd heard of Reginald Marsh. I didn't know one painter from another, but I had a hunger for this sort of information—I was sure that it would be useful later, when I was rich. Hoxey was a pleasant old man who must have once been very fat, because he had loose flesh hanging from him everywhere and as many as seven chins. I always tried to count them while he was speaking to me, but then something in his remarks would break my concentration. This physicality, which bespoke a lifetime of phlegmatic living, gave his discourse on prints the authority that a weathered desert rat would have if he told you about cactus. I remember Hoxey carefully unpacking one of the prints—a kind of crazy thing with blank-faced people swarming in and out of doorways, no one reacting to anyone else. He said that it was the calmest Reginald Marsh he'd ever seen. "No 'Moonlight and Pretzels' in this one!" he cried. I could see both that he'd be an agreeable landlord and that many health issues lay before him. As a medical student, I could make a little game of guessing which one would kill him.

A few days after I moved in, Tessa asked me over for drinks. She had done a beautiful job of making her apartment habitable, with old, comfortable furniture that she'd bought cheap and recovered. She also had a good many of Hoxey's prints on loan, though, as she explained, she was really just providing storage for them, because her collection changed as things were sold. She made a little face when she told me that she couldn't afford to get attached to any of the prints, a particular trial for her as she loved the art of all nations. Cocktails and art, I thought—maybe I'll get into her pants. I'm sure that I had a big goober smile on my face as I contemplated such an outcome.

"Because I work upstairs, I've had to become a walker just to get outside," she told me, as she mixed our drinks in a blender. "You start getting curious about different neighborhoods—where the railroaders lived, where the ranchers retired, where the doctors and bankers live. In the winter, when the wind starts up, I have to tie a scarf over my face. Anybody you see in the street is ducking for a building, kind of like in the Blitz."

As I listened, I found that I was leaning forward in my chair with my hands pressed between my knees. It was only when she stopped to look at me that I realized that my posture was strange. I pretended that I was just stretching and leaned back in an apparently casual but quite uncomfortable position. As Tessa came toward me with a brightly colored drink, it seemed as though both she and it were expanding, and when she handed me the glass I wasn't sure that I was strong enough to hold it. I felt suddenly

RISK HAZEKAMP, "ROY MEETS GIRL" (1998) / COKKIE SNOEI ROTTERDAM

as if everything were bigger than me, as if I were in over my head, trying to handle the kind of situation that, when I was rich, I would take to like a duck to water. But things settled quickly once she sat down, and I was glad to have the drink because I felt a bit cotton-mouthed. I had gone from my first impulse about getting into her pants to fearing that she'd try to get into mine.

I'm not much of a drinker; water would have served as well. That summer I'd made an experimental jaunt into a local bar. I felt that I needed to learn to be more social. I struck up a conversation with a somber, middle-aged fellow in a rumpled suit. He looked so gloomy that I regaled him with what I felt were uplifting accounts of my struggles at school. He stared at me for a while, until I sensed that all the timing was going out of my conversation. Finally, he said, "Hey boss, I gotta go: you're creeping me out."

"Now," Tessa said, "let's start at the beginning: what do you think being a doctor will do for you?"

"I don't know." My answer came out so quickly she looked startled. She leaned back into the sofa—she was at one end, I at the other—with her elbow propped on the back of it and her fingers parting the hair on the side of her head.

"You don't know?"

"I wish I did. Sorry." I involuntarily sang out this last word.

"No, that's all right. That's fine. If you don't want to talk about it, I'm O.K. with that."

I didn't share the image I had of myself: still dark-haired but with a graying mustache, marching up the gangplank of a yacht. I kept looking into my drink as if it were a teleprompter and I were the President of the United States. The colorful liquid seemed like something I had found and would have to turn in. I don't know why I made people so uncomfortable. As a kind of icebreaker, I thought to ask her a question.

"When people use the expression 'Rest in peace,' do you think they have some basis for saying it, or is it just wishful thinking?"

I can't imagine what made me think that she'd have the answer to this doleful conundrum. But surely my mother's poor health was on my mind.

"You mean, about *the dead*?"

"Sure."

Tessa looked at me for a very long time before saying anything.

"You know, let's try this another time. Maybe it's you, maybe it's me, but at this point in time and space it's just not happening."

I backed out of there like a crab. I felt sorry for Tessa; she'd probably have trouble sleeping after this weird visit from the new neighbor. I just didn't know what to do about it—an apology from me would have made it all seem even weirder.

Thereafter, we sometimes ran into each other in the hallway between our apartments, and things did not get any less awkward. I made increasingly maladroit attempts to be cordial, attempts that were received with growing skepticism, even revulsion. Finally, upon seeing me, Tessa would dart into her apartment and slam her door. What was strange is that if I lingered in the hallway after she'd gone inside, I always, moments later, heard her phone ring.

Once she said to me, "I know you're tracking my movements." And another time, "Don't think you're fooling me." And another, a cry: "Please *stop!*"

"Stop *what*?"

A mirthless laugh followed and a slammed door.

I made every effort to avoid these encounters. Indeed, I did start tracking her movements, in order to avoid her. She headed upstairs to work for Hoxey at exactly nine, out for the mail at ten-thirty, lunch with Hoxey in his apartment, catered by Mountain Foodstuff, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, out to lunch Tuesday and Thursday but always back by one-thirty, U.P.S. and FedEx and other outbound packages at four o'clock, and then her workday was over. On the weekends, I really didn't have a pattern of her activities and nervously came and went from my apartment. When she had men over, they seemed to linger around my door as if they were on the lookout for me. One afternoon, a strapping man positioned himself as though to actually block my way. I gave him a big smile and pushed past. He smelled like motor oil. He said, "Hello, Doc." Tessa must have told him that I was in premed. I said hello. I was glad to get inside and, when I looked through the little spy hole in the door, I was looking into his ear.

Concentrating on the help-wanted ads calmed me down. I had discovered that I needed to look for work in other towns, as people in Livingston knew

Victoria Roberts

"Could you take your finger off the pulse for one moment and let me know what you'd like for dinner?"

AFTER LOVE

When love empties itself out,
it fills our bodies full.

For an hour we lie braiding
pulse and skin together,

like infants who sigh
and doze, dreamy with milk.

—Donald Hall

who I was and—this really is very funny—held my studies against me.

"You can't paint my house," Mrs. Talliafero said. "You're going to be a doctor!"

"Not necessarily!" I said in my warmest tone, while hers cooled markedly. I have no idea why I answered her that way. I was sure that I was going to be a doctor, but when I was under pressure to make conversation it was as if all my life plans had gone up in smoke.

I kept studying the paper. I recognized the real opportunities that exist for those who wish to sell cars or apply siding, but the trouble I was having with my communication skills made me fear that those occupations might not be my line. I really thought that once I got my timing back—and it *was* a timing issue—I'd be able to look into a different set of prospects. I was very much focussed on my chances of being unexceptional; if I had any opportunity to keep my head down, I meant to take it.

I got a job working for a very nice guy, or so I thought, named Dan Crusoe. He was an attorney in Billings, who specialized in whiplash and owned a cute little turn-of-the-century cottage in Harlowton, which he used as a weekend place—or, rather, somewhere to vacation with his secretary, who did not enjoy the same legal standing as his wife. "Lawyers like me make doctors leave the profession every day!" he joked. "Stick to painting houses." But he was an amiable fellow with a big laugh that led one's attention away from his shrewd, close-set eyes. His dark curls were so uniform and regular they suggested the work of a beautician. When I asked him if they were natural, he told me to mind my own business with such vehemence that I actually jumped back. The previous owner of his cottage had used stolen Forest Service paint for the trim and shutters, and Dan wanted it all yellow, "like sunshine, get it?" I was rehearsing what I thought to be the appropriate style for my current position when I said, "*No problema*," but Dan seemed to detect some awkwardness in my delivery, for his eyes grew narrow and he just said, "Right."

I rented a pressure washer, masked everything, used a quality primer, and picked my weather for the final coat. The house looked much better, but Crusoe never responded to the bill I sent, nor to the second or the third. Live and learn. I wasn't much interested in exploring my remedies, and, since other revenues were unassured, I sold my car and went on a grocery binge. Also, to celebrate my first two months in the apartment, I bought a bed and put it out in the middle of the living room, where I could luxuriate in all that space and gaze east, west, and south, but not north, out of fine windows that were better than any painting, in that they were full of those moving, changing parts called "Life."

One morning, I heard a timid knock on my door and called, "Enter!" I was stretched out on my new bed in my shorts, reading a newspaper I'd found in the doorway to the bank, when I learned that my visitor was the chief of police. I was really pleased to see him, so pleased that I easily set aside my worries about the reason for his visit. I suppose that I was lonely. In a decent society, the chief of police is the one stranger you should be able to welcome into your home without reservation. But the first thing he told me was that I'd better get dressed, as I was going to jail. He gazed at me with sad knowingness. He had a big, warm face; it shouldn't be misunderstood if I state that he looked like Porky Pig, with all that guileless amiability, the same pink complexion.

"Tessa Larionov"—he gestured with his head in the direction of Tessa's door—"has charged you with making obscene phone calls to her."

"Oh?" I said. "I don't have a phone."

For one miraculous moment, there were people passing all three windows and the chief remarked that I needed curtains.

"How bad were these calls supposed to be?" I tried to picture myself as the twisted man dialling her number. In a weird way, it seemed plausible.

"They were not nice."

It comes as a great surprise to anyone who spends some time in jail in a small town that it is a remarkably stress-free environment. If your reputation is of no concern, your troubles are behind you. The Livingston jail was as good a place as any in which to unravel all the causes for the state I was in. In a rare moment of lucidity, I suggested a wiretap. The chief didn't take my idea seriously, but the next day was a new day because Tessa informed him that the calls had continued while I was in jail and the wiretap came into play after all.

It soon paid off. Hoxey had been making the calls. Tessa declined to press charges and it all went down as a lovers' quarrel, once you swallowed the fifty-one-year difference in their ages. Tessa's routine remained the same, except that her phone no longer rang so much after her workday was done. I finally ran into her in the hallway one afternoon, just as she was coming down with the packages. She stopped in her tracks, arms loaded, and regarded me quizzically. "Hello," she said. I waited before replying. I wanted her to think about what she had done to me. But she didn't seem worried, and the longer I waited the less worried she looked.

"Hello," I said.

"You look like you've been painting."

"Yes, I've been painting a house."

"Here in town?"

"Yes, a doctor's house on Third."

"How funny. But you're going to be a doctor."

"Yes, I'm going to be a doctor."

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"I don't suppose we'll ever get to the bottom of that."

"No, probably not."

"If you were sick, would you go to a doctor, or treat yourself?"

"Oh, I'd go to a doctor. I'm not a doctor yet."

"I mean if you already were. . . . Oh, never mind. Can you help me with these?"

We took the packages to the post office and I stood outside on the steps while she shipped them. I watched a grackle walk between parked cars, one of which had an American flag on its antenna. A strong young man was wheeling a cart of pies into the back of a restaurant. He looked too powerful to wheel pies. My mother drove past, blowing her horn and revealing her colossal agitation through the windshield. People in town enjoyed such scenes.

Once Tessa had sent the packages, she commended me for having taken the jailing episode with such good grace. I told her that I didn't know how I could have done otherwise, which she mistook for some form of courtesy. I used both speech and body language to indicate that I mostly understood, and that what I didn't understand I forgave.

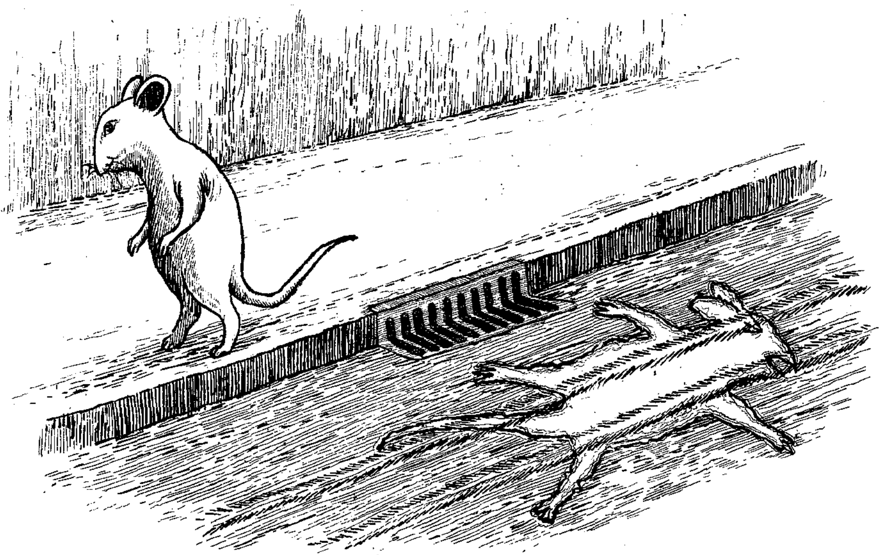
I had been brought up to believe that time delivers our dreams and quietly carries our nightmares away, and that most of what lies before us is welcoming and serene. This was part of the strange but cozy world of my home, with God in the role of Mr. Goodwrench. Or, at least, that's how I looked at it, peering out from the cocoon of my oddly sheltered Pentecostal household, where the only thing I had to worry about was the flames of eternal damnation, which didn't seem like all that much. I saw Satan as just another person who could be bought after my career took off. My mother was always telling me how deceitful the devil was, but that only made me feel that I could handle him.

Tessa soon took charge of my life, and she decided that it would be good if we were to do something together, just for fun. "Mr. Hoxey feels terrible about all that has happened," she said. "He wants to treat us to a night on the town."

That Friday, we signed up for a tango lesson.

Tessa and I and six other couples entered the Elks Hall, with its terrible acoustics and all-consuming clamminess. We were conventionally dressed; I wore a secondhand sports coat and wide tie, Tessa a black sheath that struggled to control her well-muscled shape. The others were more South American in style—hot-red lipstick on their small-town faces, tortoiseshell combs in their swept-back hair. Some of the men had gone with a pomaded look that betrayed their sense of mission. They seemed to smolder in anticipation of their future proficiency.

Our instructor was Juan Dulce, or just "Dulce," a genuine Argentine who worked his way around the American West giving lessons. He had created a



CITY MOUSE COUNTRY MOUSE

real interest in the tango in the most unlikely places—cow towns, oil towns, uranium towns, coal towns—where this hint of another kind of life carried a special allure. He was perhaps sixty, as thin as a herring, and wore striped pants, a formal black coat, a ruby cravat, and stacked heels. His hair, slicked to his skull, emphasized eyes that seemed to belong to a marine creature of some sort. He was without humor and he effectively conveyed the sacredness of his task. I doubt that I shall forget the sight of him standing on a Pepsi crate and pouring out his introduction in a deep and vibrant voice that seemed to make the room hum.

"When I am fifteen in Buenos Aires I am longing for love and suffering and, above all, success—the hope of becoming a legend of our hot and drowsy tango. I underwent numberless deprivations, but success would reward the sensual designs that I displayed in many venues. Now the money I earn is exchanged for my fatigue, but I have no other way to go, and there are days I awaken upon wretchedness. Once I converted my dancing of three weeks' duration by a pocket ruler into three hundred seventy-two kilometres. Still, tango is all! Without tango my face inspires doubt. Therefore, my advice is, press your tango to great advantage! And now we begin."

He turned on the big sound system, which had hitherto been employed to enlarge the voices of prairie politicians bent on higher office and nostalgic Scandinavian chorales with cow horns on their heads. The system had astounding capacity, and the room was soon filled with the somber, inevitable cadences of this prelude to intercourse. (As a student, I had not only enjoyed several instances of copulation—albeit with Mr. Goodwrench staring down at me—I had seen the act explained on huge blackboards, so that there could be no doubt about what was going on.)

We began to learn the steps, in the chest-to-chest Argentine style. We arrayed ourselves counterclockwise and concentrated on the spacing between us and the other dancers. My exhilaration at Tessa's great power soon gave way to apprehension, as though I were riding an unruly horse; and, when I failed to comprehend the crossover steps as described by Dulce, Tessa used her might to drag me into position with a determined expression on her face. To avoid potential humiliation, I attached myself to her flying carcass with a wiry grasp. Her cry of alarm brought Dulce to our side and the other dancers to a stop just as I was beginning to enjoy myself.

"*Señor!* Grappling has no place in our national dance!"

"I cannot follow her movements," I explained in an accent identical to Dulce's, which I found unexpectedly infectious.

"You are not to follow—you are to lead!"

"It's my fault," Tessa said. "I lost patience with him during the first *abrazo*. He just seemed lost. I'll try to do better."

"Perhaps this is the time to work on our syncopation," Dulce said sternly to both of us, "with greater respect for the movements of each other."

"The music is unfamiliar," I explained. "You don't happen to know 'La Bamba'?" He held his head and moaned as though he'd been shot.

The other couples had deftly caught on to the oddly triangular chests-together, feet-apart position. An older pair of bottle blonds, obviously trained in various kinds of ballroom dancing, made an effort to dance past at close range. The woman had a fixed and toothy Rockettes smile, and when she swept by she caught my eye and called out, "Piece of cake!"

I gave Dulce my word that I would syncopate respectfully, and I began to dance in earnest. At first, Tessa complimented me on my "good hustle," but she soon proved unequal to my speed and dexterity. Whatever had been going on in my life up to that point poured into my tango, and the exultation I began to experience was interrupted only when Tessa let out a real showstopper of a screech. Then Dulce came between us and made the mistake of laying hands on me. Insofar as I retained a modicum of male pride, this contact quickly devolved into a dusty floor battle, oddly accompanied by the raucous music of Argentina and the sounds of angry interference from the other students. With their help, I was flung into the street. "*Good night*, doctor!" I realized that Tessa had told the others that I was already out of medical school and that she was no cradle robber.

I recall feeling breathless and completely without direction as I allowed Tessa to take charge of our stroll. She stopped momentarily, between two old

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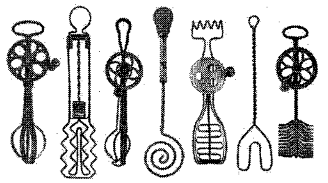
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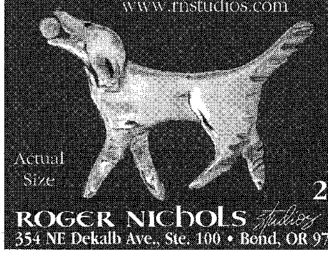
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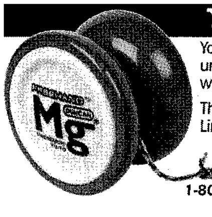
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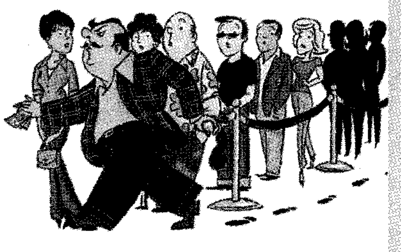

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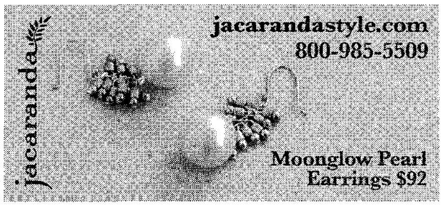

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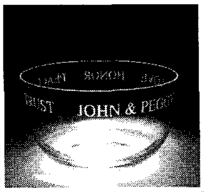

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commercial buildings, not far from the railroad yard, looked straight at me, and said, “Boo. Hiss.” We went on. “I'm lucky you didn't request Mannheim Steamroller,” she added. I was defeated.

“Now, don't be offended and, more important, don't walk in front of that car,” she said. “I realize you aren't attracted to me, are you?”

“That's not the real story,” I replied. “I need encouragement.” These two sentences were uttered with such sincerity that I could see Tessa respond with visible happiness.

“Then let me tell you my own fears. Why? Because you're adorable. Of course you're a complete idiot but, within that, there is a certain appeal—I've felt it before in pet shops. But I have fears, too. Isn't that real friendship, to tell someone your fears? You could have been extremely disagreeable over those phone calls.”

“What good would it have done?”

“None, but few people would have recognized that. I sense that you have a good heart, a good heart trapped in a self that is a hop, skip, and jump from kiddie day care. Obscene phone calls from a stranger are intolerable. But when they come from someone you know, particularly a deluded old walrus like Hoxey, well, they don't arouse quite the same wrath. You had the right to revenge and you declined to take it. Hoxey and I are in your debt.”

I had a strong glimpse here of the sensible side of Tessa, and I had a sudden hunch that she would end up a friend, which rather worried me because she was the sort who might anchor me and teach me to accept reality, such as it was then emerging.

“How about you just walk me home?” she said finally. “That work for you?”

“Of course.”

We paused at the railroad tracks to watch a big northern express rip through. She watched intently and I positioned myself behind her in such a way that it looked as if the train were pouring in one of her ears and out the other. I knew then that I would kiss her.

I suppose it took ten minutes for us to get back to the house, during which time Tessa did her level best to tell me her hopes and dreams, which were honest and simple: ride old man Hoxey into the ground and clean out his estate. That wasn't how she put it, naturally. Her concern, as she expressed it, was a passion for aesthetic rarities. “No one knows the inventory as I do. No one cares as I do, and no one knows the importance of getting it into strong and caring hands as much as I do.” I didn't say anything, and I suppose she took my silence as censorious.

We entered her apartment. Before pulling the door closed behind her, she said, “At the end of the day, it is what it is.” I wondered what that meant. Of course it is what it is, and it didn't even have to be the end of the day to be what it was. I couldn't understand this sort of thing at all, and in a way kissing someone who said things like that was like kissing air. When I did, it was with the kind of apprehension one feels on placing an open mousetrap in a promising location. Afterward, she held me at arm's length and looked at me with what one of my professors had called the copulatory gaze. She seemed all-consuming. I thought of the big-bang theory, wherein a tiny speck of matter and energy mysteriously explodes, expanding the universe.

I said, “What do you think?” My heart pounded.

She said, “Let's give it a whirl.”

We made love on the couch. I performed in a state of amazement at all that skin. Skin everywhere! At one point, she said, “I wonder if you could change your expression. I can barely do this.” When I reached that moment to which all our nature ascends and when the future of the species is assured by spasm after spasm, she remarked, “Never a dull moment.”

Over the eight years that followed, as I made my way through medical school and graduated, I'd occasionally see Tessa going about the affairs of Hoxey. She had acquired a questionable reputation around town by then, as he was now sick and demented, and she was seen as exploiting him. Then Hoxey died and whatever worries I might have had for her were briefly allayed, as it seemed that she had inherited the business.

She made an appointment to see me at the clinic. I had forgotten just how large and burningly vital she was. Her hair, piled atop her head and held there by a bright-red plastic comb, seemed to represent fulminating energy. She had a white streak, which she attributed to “trauma.”

“The henchmen of Hoxey have turned me into the street,” she told me, “leaving me with little more than the clothes on my back."

"Tessa, I find this very hard to picture."

"Perhaps a few prints, a watercolor or two."

"Who exactly are these 'henchmen'?"

"His children. Grown daughters. I never factored them in. They arrived on the scene like Valkyries hovering over the battlefield in search of corpses."

"I'm terribly sorry to hear this."

"At a difficult time in your life, Doctor, I offered you companionship and sexual healing."

"What can I do? Medication is my line, but I don't think that's what you're looking for."

"I plan to stay here, and I'll have to start looking for work. I hope you'll recommend me."

BENOIT JACQUES

I reached for a pen, poised to join the millions who have made their way out of a difficult situation by providing a letter of recommendation. But Tessa said, "Not now. I'll let you know."

That, more or less, was the end of our appointment. She seemed happy with my response, taking my hand in both of hers. I suppose that she was just checking to see whether I was still on her side.

Tessa went downhill fast. Within two years, she had spells of homelessness, punctuated by temporary jobs, none of which became permanent, because of her imperious nature, her contempt for owners and bosses. She never left a job—she stormed out of it. She took over the homes where she was briefly a guest. Even as her fortunes fell, Tessa didn't lose her rakish airs, though they began to seem just a bit automatic, as she strode around town in worn clothes.

I was one of several people who helped in small ways, but I rarely saw Tessa. By this time, I had established the small-town practice that would not make me rich, though it might make me happy. Hoxey had long ago returned to California in powder form, leaving nothing behind him. Those years seemed to have allowed me to awaken from my own background and, without boasting, I can say that I had become somewhat less of a fool, though I was constantly aware that my foolishness could come back at any time, like a virus that lies dormant at the base of the spine. I can't say that I saw Tessa as my responsibility; nor can I claim to have quite got her out of my mind.

The December night that I was celebrating my fortieth birthday with a cake in the emergency room, an ambulance arrived with Tessa: into her abdomen she had plunged a serrated bread knife, an item she continued to clutch on the gurney that conveyed her. I took it from her hand and, feeling on me the heat of her eyes, I quickly began dealing with her wound. I knew that if she were admitted to the clinic itself she would be subjected to what I viewed as diagnostic imprudences—laparotomy and other explorations, which experience had caused me to associate with increased morbidity. Though I would later have a chance to review these judgments, I honestly feel that they didn't alter the way things turned out. In effect, I was keeping Tessa to myself. I had hoped that this was only a cry-for-help injury—the timing, during my shift, aroused my suspicions—but the knife, it turned out, had pierced the skin, the subcutaneous layer, the linea alba, and the peritoneum, and I could only hope that it had gone no further; that is, into the viscera. Over the next four days, attending Tessa around the clock while she stared at me without speaking, I failed to contain the major spillage, the uncontrolled peritoneal contamination, the necrosis, and an infection that laughed off antibiotics in a general cascade. She was looking right through me when she slipped away.

Aren't there things that your parents should tell you? After my mother died, I'd gone to my childhood house and found her reading glasses. I'd sat on our old sofa by the window overlooking a stunted row of odorless roses, still knowing, after all those years, which part of the sofa I could sit on without feeling the springs. I put my mother's glasses on. The earpieces were too short for me, and I had to press them down on my nose uncomfortably. It didn't matter: I could barely see through them. ♦

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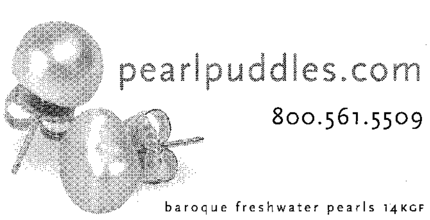
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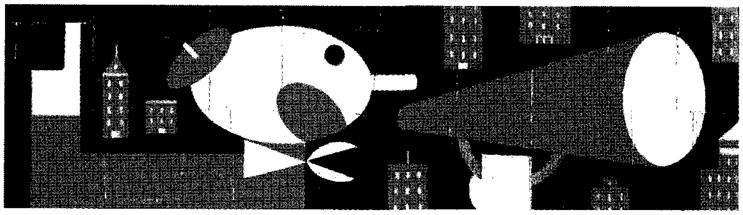


ON TELEVISION

THE PAPER CHASE

Office life in two worlds.

BY TAD FRIEND

If Samuel Beckett were still around, his plays might begin on the late shift. "*An office. An unattended PC glows under strong fluorescent light. Front left, a copying machine. Front right, a document shredder. Back, in near-darkness, a lounge with a disorderly refrigerator. A head peeps over a cubicle wall.*"

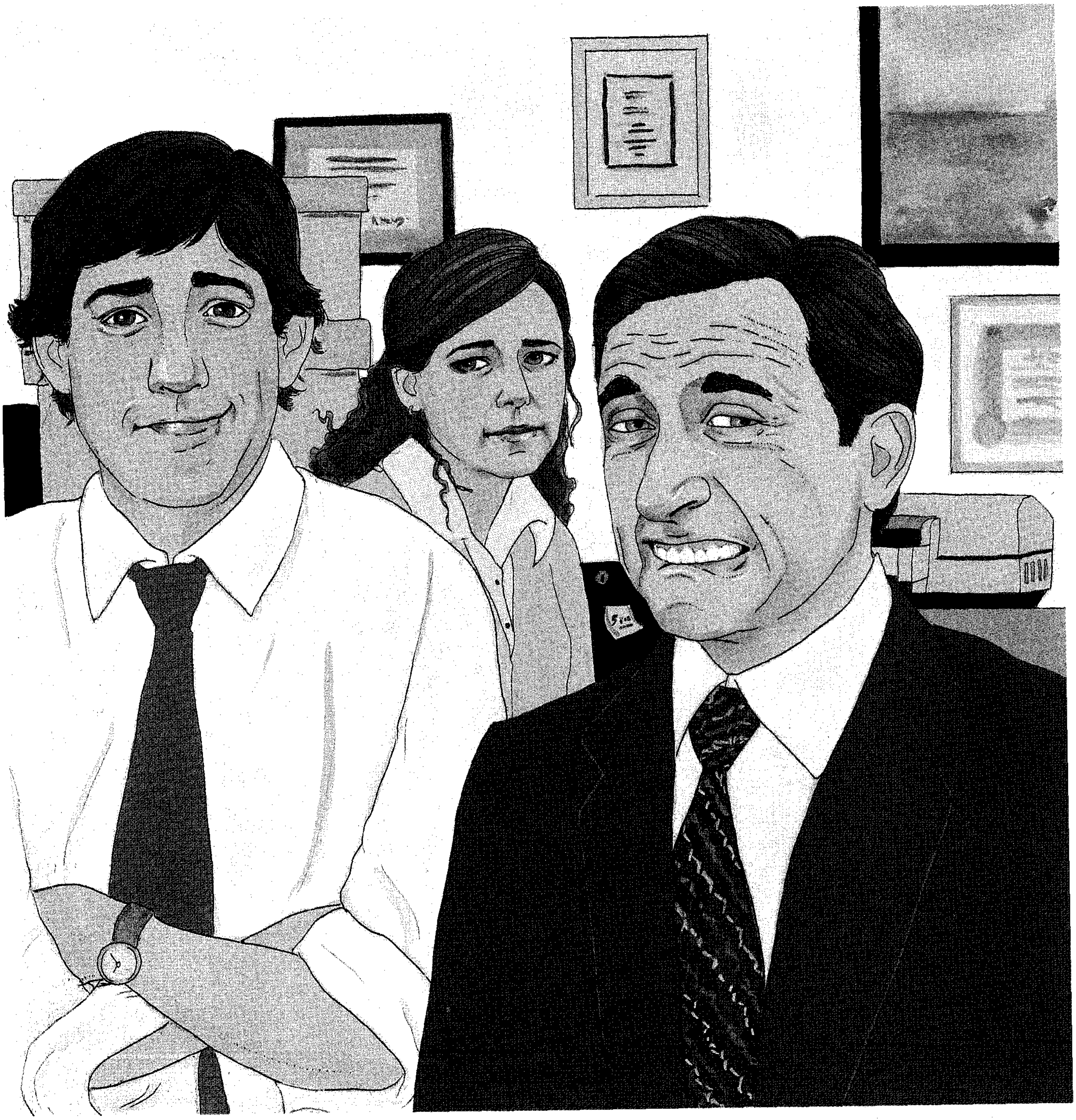
Yet Beckett might consider an office too familiar, too encoded with generic misery. Just as a commercial about a fretful housewife readies us for a miracle spray, so a commercial set in an office—such as one for FedEx, Sprint Nextel, and countless others—prepares us for jocular scenes of oppression. The ads follow the blueprint established by the "Dilbert" comic strip and by Mike Judge's 1999 film "Office Space" (where the boss kept dropping by to follow up on "those T.P.S. reports"). At the office, we have come to understand, the boss is always a blustery martinet; abbreviations are a B.F.D.; your co-workers eat your food, talk your ear off, and stab you in the back; and work has no inherent value.

The richest treatment of these themes—and other, more searching considerations—occurred on "The Office," a BBC Two sitcom whose impact vastly exceeded the length of its run: a mere twelve episodes in 2001-02 and a two-part coda, "The Office Christmas Special," the following year. Shot as a mock documentary, it examined the daily nonevents at a branch of Wernham Hogg, a fictional paper-supply company in Slough, the city west of London celebrated by John Betjeman: "Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough! / It isn't fit for humans now." The show, which aired here on BBC America and is available as a DVD set, was indebted for its format and some of its improvisatory byplay to such Christopher Guest films as "Best in Show," but while Guest's characters are defined by excessive optimism, the paper pushers created by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant were glum and self-loathing. They gauged their standing in the world by their jobs, as many of us do, and their jobs involved monotonous labor at a failing company in a collapsing industry. Like "The Office," standout workplace sitcoms—including "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "M*A*S*H," "Taxi," and "The Larry Sanders Show"—take place at pokey or besieged outfits. Their characters' struggles to have their lives matter make the show "relatable," as the networks put it. Failure is repeatedly relatable, whereas triumph goes down best in a single serving, such as one of those movies about unlikely bobsled heroes or plucky pint-size hockey players. A Goldman Sachs sitcom would have to be set in the mailroom, because watching envy and truckling is a lot funnier than watching the distribution of Christmas bonuses.

The workers at Wernham Hogg wear muted blues and grays and seem to be drowning in queasy fluorescence; they never see the sun. The show's format compounded the gloom, because our emotions weren't being cued with pop-song hooks or jolted by a laugh track; yet, by placing the cameras right up in the action and interspersing one-on-one interviews, the show allowed us to discover the characters for ourselves. The documentary verisimilitude also allowed scenes to peter out with a blank look or a sigh rather than build up to the American joke-joke-joke crescendo, known as the "blow," a structure that usually involves someone bellowing at a freshly slammed door, "Does this mean we're not getting married?"

The show's lodestar was Ricky Gervais as the regional manager, David Brent. With his dated Vandyke, darting eyes, and shit-eating grin; with his wish to be more of a friend and entertainer than a boss, a wish torpedoed by the coercive feebleness of his patter and his horrifying dance moves; and with his unerring gift for joining conversations and killing them with one unpardonable remark, David was a new figure in sitcoms: the unbearable lead. In the first episode, in a scene that extended for an excruciating two and a half minutes, he sought to impress the new temp by having him sit in as he played a practical joke on the receptionist, Dawn (Lucy Davis). After calling her into his office, he pretended to fire her for stealing. When she began to sob, he winced and shifted and finally murmured, "Good girl, that was a joke we were doing." With her head still in her hands, she called him a "wanker" and a "sad little man." "Am I?" he said, attempting nonchalance. "Didn't know that." But he does. And our slow discovery of how this self-knowledge eats at David made us, grudgingly, begin to think of him as tragic.

While Gervais and Merchant's decision to end the show well before it jumped the scene was admirable, NBC's decision to air an American version, beginning in the spring of 2005, seemed deplorable. The show's cult of admirers was outraged; the New York *Observer* wrote that, to much of Hollywood, "this smells like another colossal failure in the works." It was as if the network had announced that it was going to take a British institution like "Pop Idol" and remake it with a jingoistic title like "American Idol." (Since then, Québécois, French, and German networks have rolled out local versions of "The Office"; the template is becoming as globally ubiquitous as "Baywatch.") The doubters had reason for concern, though: while classic sitcoms such as



John Krasinski, Jenna Fischer, and Steve Carell star in the American version of "The Office."

LARA TOMLIN

"All in the Family" and "Sanford and Son" were based on British models, more recent efforts to adapt "Absolutely Fabulous," "Coupling," and "The Kumars at No. 42" had all gone amiss.

Initially, NBC was too respectful. The goings on at the Scranton branch of the Dunder-Mifflin paper company duplicated those at Wernham Hogg scene for scene, which didn't play to the new writers' interests or the new cast's strengths. But in the fall of 2005 the writers, led by Greg Daniels, the co-creator of "King of the Hill," declared independence, and soon enough the show became a hit, first as a downloaded phenomenon on iTunes and then in the Nielsen ratings. It also became the best sitcom on the air. The creative turning point was last fall's Halloween episode, in which Dunder-Mifflin's corporate office in New York tells Michael Scott (the American version of David Brent, played by Steve Carell) to fire an employee by the end of the day. As he loudly struggles to think of a way out, or a way to get someone else to do it, Carell lets us see his character rummaging around in his brain for ideas, rocking forward as if to tip one closer to his mouth. The episode becomes completely goofy when Michael, in costume with a papier-mâché head on his shoulder, persuades his dweeby but Machiavellian lieutenant, Dwight (a brilliantly humorless Rainn Wilson), that the second head is whispering advice about whom to fire.

The winning silliness was new, as was that episode's final scene. We see Michael, after going through with the firing, sitting glumly in his condo. Then the doorbell rings and he brightens,

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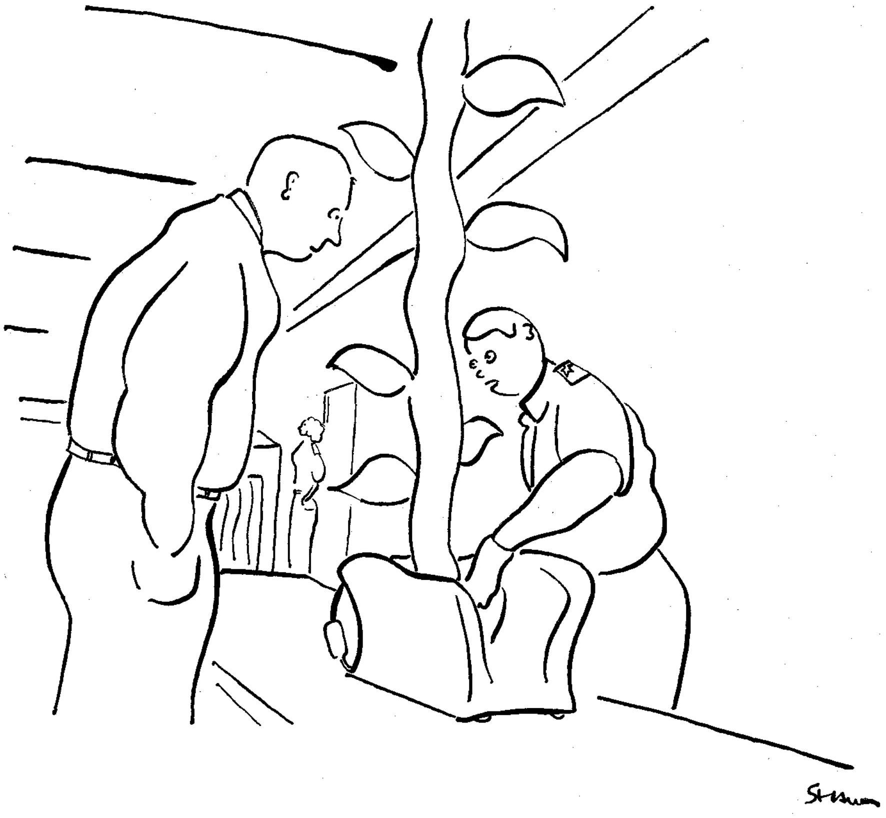

“Did you leave your bag unattended or trade your cow for magic beans?”

• •

spilling candy in his eagerness to befriend a group of trick-or-treaters. Sappy, perhaps, but also an assertion that work needn't define us.

The British “Office” was a pitiless meditation on rules and class. (The American “Office” doesn't care about class; the writers handle very gently the fact that Michael's favorite New York restaurants are a Sbarro's and a Red Lobster.) David Brent was always afraid that he was being sneered at—and he was. It wasn't so much that David's bosses spoke in the tones of the BBC, while he spoke Estuary English and prided himself on knowing all the pop-culture trivia familiar to readers of the *Sun;* it was his attempts to disguise his background by larding his conversation with Latin tags like “ipso facto,” always misused, and with management-speak about, say, “team individuality.” And there was his public behavior, as when a woman at a club accused him of wanting just to shag her. His wounded rejoinder: “Yeah, and from behind, 'cause your breath stinks of onions, and I didn't tell you that, did I?” As he smirked at her—touché!—she slapped him, and everyone froze. The appalled silence was “The Office”'s recurrent landing point.

Most of David's employees didn't know what to do with their embarrassment, but Tim (Martin Freeman), a salesman, usually bailed out of the collective mortification with a deadpan look at the camera. Making faces is the way the weak take their revenge. (Tim also regularly needled David's provincial assistant, perpetuating a British tradition of repressive jeering that extends back to Mr. Bennet in “Pride and Prejudice,” who observed, “For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbors, and laugh at them in our turn?”)

Many of Tim's poker-faced glances and slightly pop-eyed takes were directed toward Dawn; he wooed her the way a dog woos its master. Their long-simmering mutual crush was the show's sole gesture toward the optimistic American “arc,” in which characters go on a journey together and are rewarded. But the crush didn't boil over, because Dawn was engaged to someone else. Tim and Dawn were afraid to break the rules—

and their colleagues, equally afraid, made sure that they didn't.

David declared at one point that he'd like "to live, you know, on and on and on, you know—know what it's like to live forever." Yet the show's blank interstitial shots of the photocopier chunking out documents and of people staring at their computer screens, just as before, became increasingly dreadful. "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" as Estragon observes in "Waiting for Godot." In the final episode, when David's bravado crumbled and he pleaded with his bosses in a low voice to rescind their decision to fire him ("Don't . . . make me redundant," he said, barely able to get the words out. "Just say that it's not definite now"), his appeal to keep things as they were, given how bad even he knew they were, was wrenching.

The challenge that faced the American "Office" was to honor the spirit of the original while tweaking the workplace dynamics so that audiences would want to watch more than twelve episodes. The British scabrousness and barely suppressed violence is gone, and the Scranton office—brighter and noisier, with more posters, parties, and pep—is Slough on Zoloft. Scranton has its thwarted lovebirds, too, Jim and Pam (the boyishly appealing John Krasinski and a depressed but radiant Jenna Fischer), who are better-looking and more assertive than Tim and Dawn. But two more office romances have been woven into the mix, and where Ricky Gervais's David was nearly asexual, Steve Carell's Michael Scott is weirdly and delightfully pansexual. Ryan, the go-getter junior salesman (B. J. Novak, one of several writers on the show who also play characters), tries never to be alone with his boss. It's not just that Michael slaps him on the rear and calls him on his cell phone to coo but that Michael once proclaimed, when everyone was playing Who Would You Do?, "Well, I would definitely have sex with Ryan!," adding, a moment late, " 'cause he's going to own his own business." Which makes it perfectly understandable.

Referring to such differences, Kevin Reilly, the president of NBC Entertainment, has remarked that "Americans need a little bit more hope than the British." In fact, conditions in Scranton are fairly hopeless: when it appeared, earlier this season, as if the branch might close, many of the employees were delighted. Toby, the doleful human-resources nebbish (Paul Lieberstein), told the camera, "For a minute there, I saw myself selling my house, moving to Costa Rica, learning how to surf. But, Costa Rica will still be there . . . when I'm sixty-five."

What distinguishes Dunder-Mifflin from Wernham Hogg is not hope but consolation. In the British "Office," we never learned most people's names; the American version lovingly anatomizes everyone and takes advantage of the long-take documentary format to reveal the full complexity of everyone's feelings (we glean, for instance, that Toby has an unspoken crush on Pam, and therefore resents Jim). Lost is the condemnatory power of the anonymous British chorus; gained are both a standard American melting pot and a commedia-dell'arte stock company, featuring Kelly the Yakker, Meredith the Lush, Kevin the Letch, and Creed the Cantankerous Freak, who is just a possession or two away from being a hobo. When Dwight is hovering uselessly in Michael's office as Michael tries to deal with the sudden death of his predecessor, who was decapitated in a car accident, Creed (Creed Bratton) suddenly dips in his random oar.

CREED: You know, a human can go on living for several hours after being decapitated.
DWIGHT: You're thinking of a chicken.
CREED: What'd I say?

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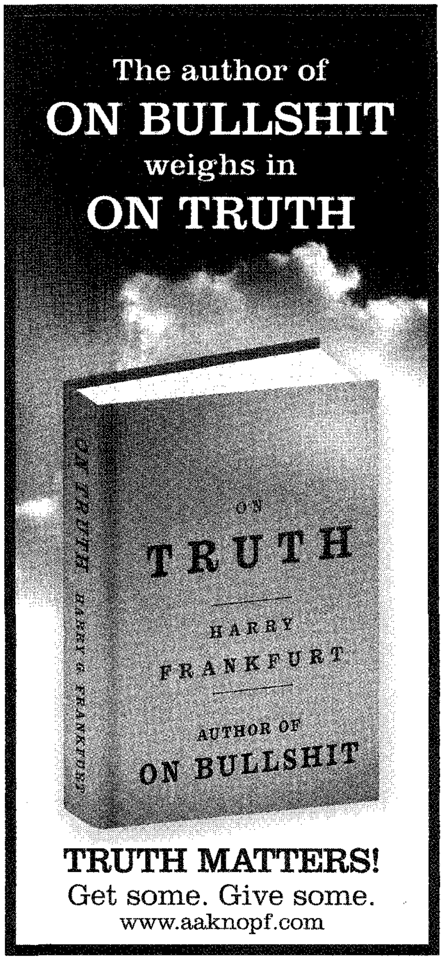
This office taps home the point that work is fundamentally alien to the work-



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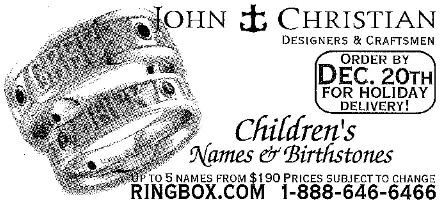

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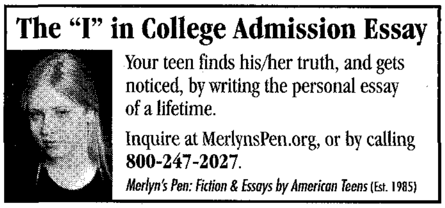

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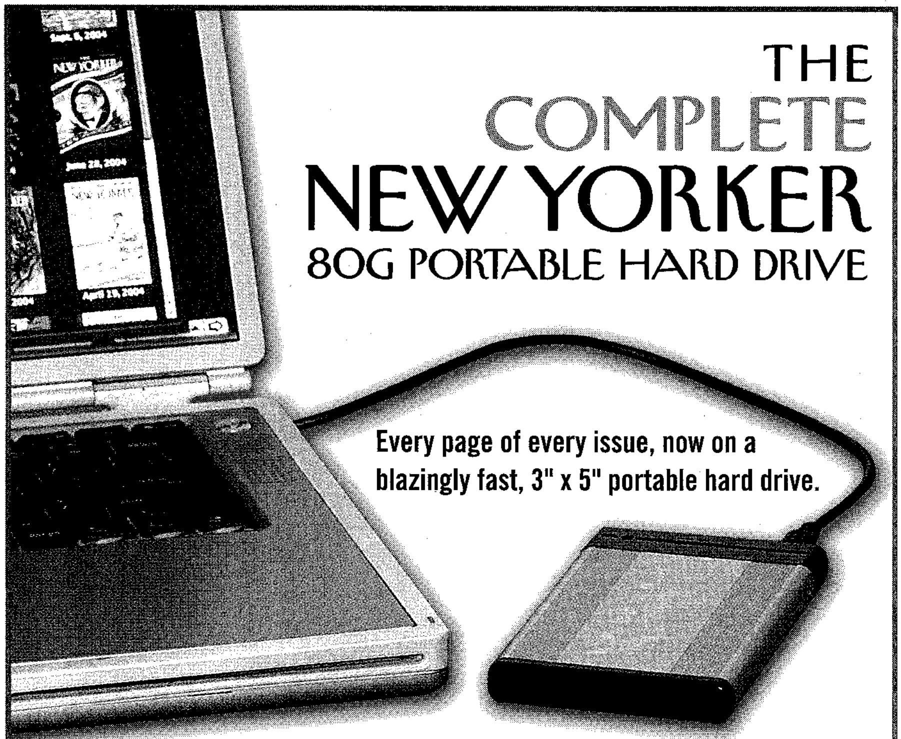

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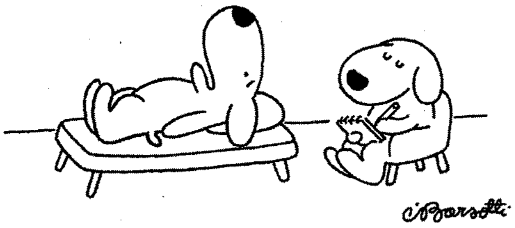

"They moved my bowl."

Charles Barsotti, 1995

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place. The reason that bosses become blustery martinets is that any sensible employee at a place like Dunder-Mifflin would rather play video games or gossip than tutor clients in the manifold varieties of copy paper. Yet Michael is the worst offender; he hates paperwork and is constantly distracting his employees while supposedly motivating them—the man is a karaoke machine of samplings from leadership manuals, and his emotional declarations sound like "The 48 Laws of Power." "Would I rather be feared or loved?" he wonders aloud. "Um, easy: both. I want people to be afraid of how much they love me." There is something Trump-like about Michael—the inert quiff of hair, the bombastic maxims, the bluff, mechanical determination.

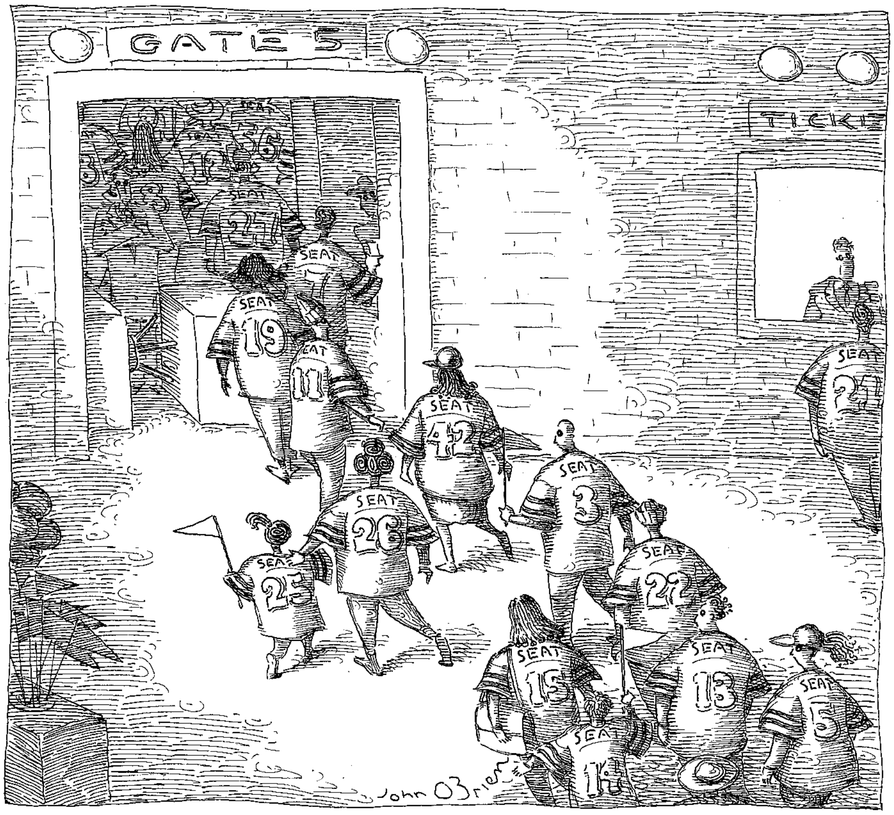
Where David Brent wields language like a blunderbuss, brandishing it before the gates of the establishment, Michael wraps himself in it like a Sean John jacket, longing, hopelessly, to be black. "Wassup!" he cries, to his "dawgs" and "be-yotches" when they're "in the house." Last week, in an episode guest-written by Gervais and Merchant, he put on a do-rag and pretended to be Prison Mike, giving his employees the 411 on why office life is, in fact, preferable to time in the hole. There are also, in a somewhat more Caucasian mode, his impressions of Moe Howard, of the Three Stooges, and Adolf Hitler, of the Third Reich. Steve Carell does wonderful work with his voice, going from strangled and squeaky when he's wounded to orotund when he's feeling statesmanlike, an effect routinely shattered by his penchant for cackling and blurting out "Fo' shizzle!" or "What's the dealio?" All the conversational lint that tumbles around the airwaves gets trapped on the blank mesh of his brain.

Michael is less concerned with class than David, but he's classier. When layoffs loomed at Wernham Hogg, David leapt to take a promotion, even though it meant that his Slough office would close (in the end, he failed the physical). By contrast, when Michael is told that the Scranton branch will be shuttered, he and Dwight drive to New York to appeal for his workers' jobs. Scranton winds up absorbing the somewhat more professional Stamford branch, not because of Michael's ultimately irrelevant road trip but because Stamford's manager leveraged the situation and got a better job at Staples. Jim tells the camera, "Say what you will about Michael Scott, but he would never do that."

Aside from such occasional clangers—fundamental-decency alert!—the show has a near-perfect grasp of tone. When Pam accepts her "Dundie" award from Michael at the annual ceremony at Chili's, she has been drinking and flirting with Jim and wants to show off for him, so she launches into a mock acceptance speech. "Finally," she concludes, "I want to thank God"—and her pause as she glances at the award in her hand and the engagement ring she has worn for more than three years is strangely affecting—"because God gave me this Dundie, and because I feel God in this Chili's tonight." In such scenes, the show manages to send up the forced camaraderie that Michael demands while celebrating its haphazard but genuine epiphanies.

The American show is much more willing to bend reality in the service of a joke. Jim, who sits next to Dwight and is able to tolerate his pettiness only by thinking of ingenious ways to punk him, goes so far as to send him faxes that purport to be time-travelling warnings from "future Dwight"—and Dwight heeds them. But the new "Office" does fix the original's nagging realism problem: it was difficult to believe that David Brent would have lasted in his job for eight years. The writers take care to demonstrate that Michael Scott's intense, blundering amiability can close a sale, particularly when the client is drunk. Most of the time, Michael's boss, Jan Levinson (a splendid Melora Hardin as a steely professional occasionally beset by self-doubt), can't understand why she hasn't fired him. But Jan also warms to Michael's sympathetic side, particularly when she's drunk. She even makes out with him, twice, to her everlasting chagrin.

Michael is too dim to understand that Jan is way out of his league; he sees himself as a sort of man-about-town who's not afraid to cry. In this vein, he regularly convenes breach-healing colloquia about diversity and tolerance, which always backfire. This fall, he tried to demonstrate that there's nothing scary about gays by publicly embracing Oscar (Oscar Nuñez), an accountant who he had been told, privately, was gay. (Michael explained to us that he wished he'd known about Oscar's sexuality, because



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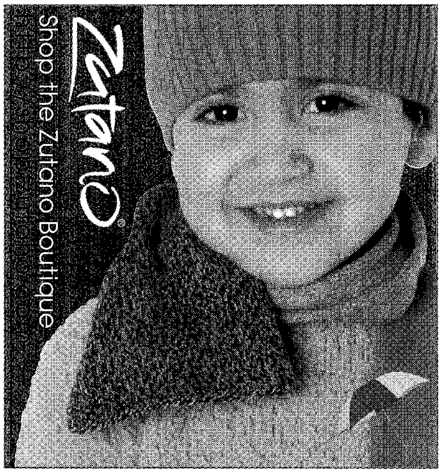

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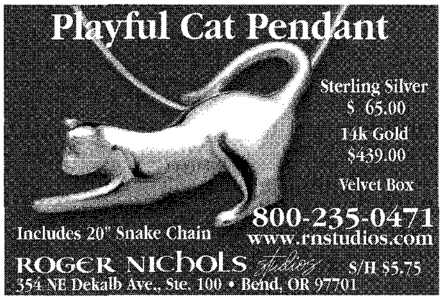
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then he wouldn't have kept calling him "faggy." "You don't call retarded people retards," he pointed out, with characteristic logic. "It's bad taste. You call your friends retards when they're acting retarded. And I consider Oscar a friend.") Oscar rejected the embrace with a shove, declaring, "I don't want to touch you—ever consider that? You're ignorant. And insulting. And small." Michael's pained glance at the camera demonstrates Steve Carell's particular strength as a comic actor: he doesn't just deliver jokes and P.C. doubletalk—he swaddles them in bubble wrap and adds a gift card. When they don't go over, he's crestfallen. Here he ended up crying on Oscar's shoulder: "Sorry I called you faggy." Michael wants nothing more than to keep his humiliations to himself. But there are so many.

The biggest humiliation, though he hasn't yet begun to acknowledge it, is the growing evidence that his office is not exactly a family. Michael's employees, of course, recognize family metaphors as a corporate falsehood, and they behave accordingly: his wingman, Dwight, recently maneuvered to replace him, having earlier told us that his defining quality as a worker was loyalty—"but if there were somewhere else that valued that loyalty more highly, I'm going wherever they value loyalty the most."

Similarly, Andy, a new guy from Stamford (Ed Helms, in a scene-stealing turn as a smarmy frat-boy type), tells us he'll have the second-in-command job within six weeks, through "name repetition" and "personality mirroring." Michael falls for the manipulation, of course, and his credulousness made us feel the sort of sadness we feel when a computer outplays Garry Kasparov. Even Jim has no problem with getting ahead and is now Michael's No. 2. Class isn't destiny here; destiny is achieved by selling and, in both senses of the word, hustling.

Gervais and Merchant's handling of the Tim-and-Dawn plot was a master class in the pleasures of delayed gratification. At the very end of the show's coda, "The Office Christmas Special," Dawn tearily stepped into Tim's arms. The related issue that the American "Office" must now resolve seems, at first, merely technical: how to perpetuate Jim and Pam's mating dance as the show continues indefinitely. Their flirtation is more articulated, playful, and intimate than Tim and Dawn's longing; it's screwball rather than chivalric. They essentially serve as the office's cruise directors, engineering a karate bout between Michael and Dwight and conducting an office Olympics with medals made from yogurt lids (they give Michael a gold lid for closing on his condo).

Inspired writing can multiply obstacles for a long time: Sam and Diane teased viewers for five years on "Cheers," and Niles and Daphne eyed each other for seven years on "Frasier" before running off together. But when the will-they-or-won't-they plot winds down, it often takes the show with it, as it did on "Moonlighting." Precisely because Jim and Pam's relationship has been so poignant—it's the show's chief ornament—they are fast running out of reasons to stay apart. At the end of last season, Jim approached Pam in the parking lot one night and said, "I'm in love with you." A few minutes later in the darkened office, a likelier setting, they kissed. Then she said she was still going to marry Roy, her lunk of a fiancé. Yes, it made no sense. This season, even as Pam called off the wedding, Jim left for the Stamford office so that he could forget her; now the merger has brought him back, along with his Stamford colleague and new girlfriend, Karen (a spunky Rashida Jones). Their relationship feels much more mature than Jim and Pam's skylarking, and so is clearly doomed.

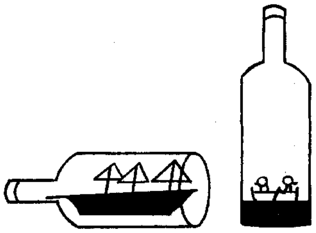
How this matter plays out will define the show's view of office life. Is this "Office" a romance, a place to find your soul's counterpoint? Or is it a comedy of consolation, a place where dreams of love and Costa Rica gradually slip away? Michael, at least, would argue for the romance. Last season, he urged Jim to "never, ever, ever give up" his pursuit of Pam. It helped, somehow, that Michael uttered this Churchillian sentiment while wearing plastic handcuffs and shivering in the makeshift brig of a booze-cruise boat on Scranton's Lake Wallenpaupack. The frigid weather and the correctional setting were straight out of the British original; the unlooked-for kindness was a local contribution. The BBC and NBC are two offices separated by a common language. ♦

LAURENT CILLUFO

BRIEFLY NOTED

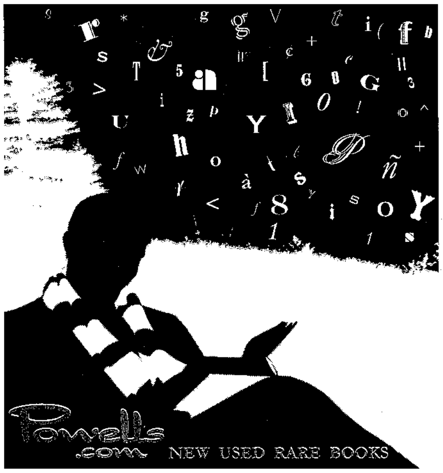
Redemption, *by Frederick Turner (Harcourt; $24).* Turner's slow, humid tale, punctuated by indescribable violence, sexual and otherwise, unrolls in 1913, along the streets of Storyville, New Orleans. Every night, Francis Muldoon, a.k.a Fast-Mail, a former cop whose gunshot injury has put him out of commission, keeps an eye on business for Tom Anderson, whose fiefdom extends from swank saloons to two-bit whorehouses. Turner's subject is the way a district's history of poverty, defilement, and petty retribution can coexist with, and be elevated by, its trade in beauty and every kind of physical and spiritual release. But the pace of his prose, which is sonorous and blurry with Storyville grime—"And in that suddenly created solitude he was left with only the mute memory they shared," and so on—obscures the lines of Muldoon's story, his transformation into a person willing to barter his own future for a small shred of dignity.

Grave of Light: New and Selected Poems, *1970-2005, by Alice Notley (Wesleyan; $29.95).* This fat book, mostly drawn from numerous small-press and chapbook publications, describes a poetic career of restless experimentation, self-invention, and subversion. An Iowa Writers' Workshop poet by way of the Mojave town of Needles, California, Notley, with her first husband, Ted Berrigan, belonged to the second wave of the New York School. Her work displays a lucid sense of humor and a debt to William Carlos Williams. "I Hope I'm Not Here Next Year," from 1970, begins: "I'll say / the one nice thing about that apartment / was how my desk was / Desk? / Shit it was an orange crate / But right in front of a window / in a stream of / dazzling 3 o'clock light." She is also a troublemaker, sporadic with syntax, and associatively loose. At one point, she inquires, "Is there a right and wrong poetry, one might / still ask."



The Middle Sea, *by John Julius Norwich (Doubleday; $39.95).* In his latest sweeping history, the author of "Byzantium" considers the "political fortunes" of the lands of the Mediterranean from the age of ancient Greece to the First World War. Taking as a starting point the region's unique geography, which seems to have been "deliberately designed" as a "cradle of cultures," he focusses on the rise and fall of civilizations through battles and their heroes, paying particular attention to the Christian and Muslim struggle for dominance. At times, the geographical framework feels arbitrary. The Mediterranean's bearing on the countries around it was not always as manifest as during antiquity; from 200 B.C. to 200 A.D., there was a higher density of commercial traffic than at any time in the following millennium. There are also some egregious omissions: art, social, and intellectual history are essentially passed over. But Norwich's focus plays to his strengths as a military historian, and he produces, over six hundred pages, a highly readable chronicle.

Mirrors of the Unseen, *by Jason Elliot (St. Martin's; $24.95).* In this penetrating account of a series of journeys to Iran, Elliot reports on the "double life" of the Persians he meets, who unanimously denounce the ruling mullahs. One insists that you're nobody in Iran if you haven't been imprisoned; another rolls his eyes at the author's obsessive trawling of mosques, protesting, "People will think I'm with a fanatic." The book is replete with historical arcana (such as the second-century Parthian tactic of catapulting jars of bloodsucking flies at enemies), ruminations on the "turbulent calligraphies" of Islamic architecture, and labyrinthine footnotes that threaten to leap off into tomes of their own. Elliot is a travel writer of the old school: untethered to an itinerary, eager to be led astray, and as ardent an observer of the experience of travelling as of his destination.



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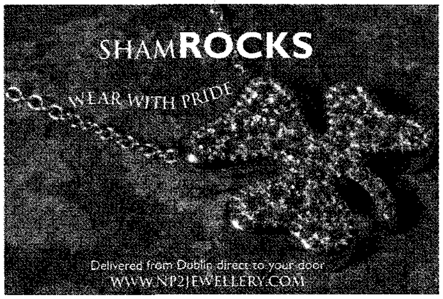

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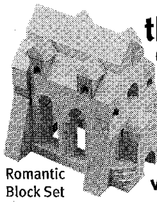

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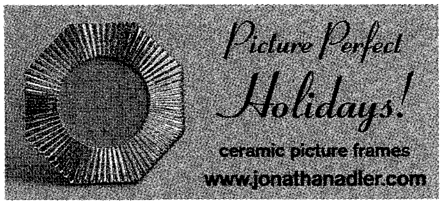

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BOOKS

WALLED OFF

Can Burma escape from its history?

BY JOHN LANCHESTER

Burma stood out in my childhood as the place about which there were no stories. My parents moved there in March, 1963, when I was just over a year old. We spent six months in Rangoon, and for that entire period we were under house arrest. The military junta led by General Ne Win, which had seized power the year before, was shutting down all foreign activity in the country. My father was allowed to travel to the bank where he worked in order to help wind up its business, because the bank—like everything else in the country, including the Boy Scouts and the Automobile Association—was being nationalized. My mother and I stayed at home. Our camera was confiscated—it's the only place we lived of which I don't have any photographs. The house had a permanent staff of nine, so there was nothing to do. My parents had stories about everywhere we'd ever lived and everyone they'd ever met, but their experience of Burma was so weirdly isolated and isolating that they had next to nothing to say about it.

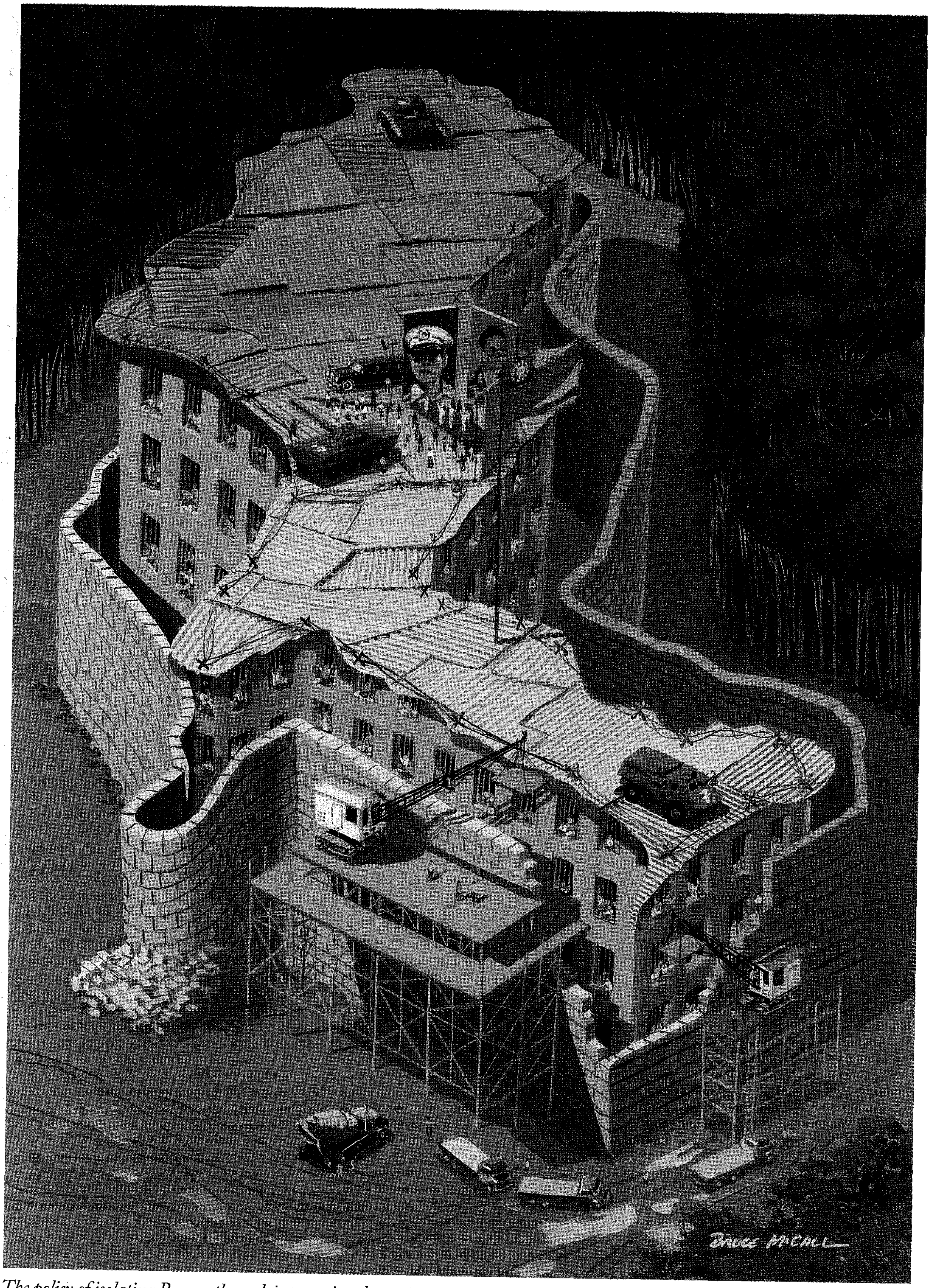
In that, we had something in common with the Burmese. Protected on one side by the Himalayan foothills and on the other by the Andaman Sea, Burma, as Thant Myint-U makes clear in his brilliant new history, "The River of Lost Footsteps" (Farrar, Straus; $25), has long been preoccupied with isolation, and the desire to be cut off from the world recurs in its history. It is an impulse that has taken on a particular importance since the nineteenth century, when the British Empire decided to bring Burma into the modern world the only way it knew how: by conquering it.

Burma was one of the few places where the British pursued a policy of regime change. The British weren't shy of fighting wars of choice, but they preferred coöpting local élites to overthrowing them. The formula, which reflected the mercantile origins of the empire, and was followed from the southernmost tip of Africa to the easternmost parts of Asia, was roughly as follows: get local proxies to do as much of the fighting as possible, pick a figurehead, distribute baubles and titles, build some roads and schools, and declare the country open for business.

In the Burma of the mid-eighteen-eighties, things were different. Lord Randolph Churchill (the father of Winston) had assumed responsibility for the country, as part of his portfolio as Secretary of State for India. An explorer named Archibald Colquhoun had recently caused a stir by publishing "Burma and the Burmans: Or, 'The Best Unopened Market in the World.' " The book argued that the only thing preventing British business from making a killing in the region was the despotic and incompetent king, Thibaw, who had succeeded his father in 1878. Inheriting the throne had never been straightforward in Burma, where kings routinely had dozens of children to compete for the title. Thibaw, who was twenty-one when he took the throne, became king as a result of wrangling among various factions at court; the key figure in all this was his wife, Supayalat. She was his only queen—in defiance of custom, whereby the king had several wives, and many concubines—and seems to have been a Burmese Lady Macbeth. Shortly after taking over the throne, Thibaw ordered eighty-three members of the royal family killed; the women were strangled, and the men were tied up in red sacks and beaten to death with paddles. (The idea was to avoid any visible shedding of royal blood—though some accounts have the men being trampled to death by elephants, which must have been at least a little messy.)

The murder of potentially troublesome royal rivals was standard procedure in Burma, but it played badly in what was becoming the age of modern communications. By the summer of 1885, Thibaw was a famous ogre, Burma was a famous potential market, and Churchill, running

BRUCE McCALL



The policy of isolating Burma through international sanctions may not have weakened the regime but, rather, helped to shore it up.

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as the self-proclaimed advocate of "progressive conservatism," was contesting a parliamentary seat in the radical hotbed of Birmingham, a city with a large industrial vote. All that he needed was a strategic reason for an invasion, and this was soon provided by a rumor of French involvement in Burma. A casus belli was cooked up, over a fine that Burmese officials—probably corrupt ones—had imposed on a Scottish company. War was declared. General Sir Harry North Dalrymple Prendergast and his troops made short work of deposing Thibaw, and very hard work of suppressing the guerrilla resistance that followed. British officials had assumed, Thant says, that "a swift and simple change at the top would lead to quick submission and the rapid return of normal government." It didn't. In the end, the suppression of the rebellion took three times as many troops as the initial invasion, and succeeded partly because of the enervating effects of a brutal famine.

More than a century later, it's clear that the aftermath of this particular imperial adventure has been catastrophic. There are regimes that attract more negative attention than the Burmese dictatorship of today, but there are few that are as universally condemned, or that have shown such a consistent talent for immiserating their own people. (In 1989, the dictatorship changed the name of the country to Myanmar, but, since this decision was not ratified by any democratic assembly, the U.S. government and all overseas Burmese groups continue to use the old name.) There is no liberty and no democracy in Burma, where the winner of a 1990 election, Aung San Suu Kyi, is still living under house arrest. The dictatorship has an almost unrivalled record of economic incompetence, at one point managing to make Burma, which is rich in natural resources, one of the ten poorest countries in the world. The "Burmese Way to Socialism," as the junta's official ideology is called, is a mixture of isolationism, nationalism, self-proclaimed Buddhism, and outright fantasy.

The presiding spirit for decades was Ne Win, the dictator from 1962 until his ostensible retirement, in 1988, and the most powerful man in the country for some years afterward. Ne Win was a failed postal clerk and coal dealer who found his calling when the Japanese gave him military training during the Second World War. He was a ruthless behind-the-scenes operator, a partygoer, a much-married man (no one knows how often) who for years used to fly to Vienna for consultations with a psychiatrist. He also had strong sidelines in astrology and numerology, and was willing to act on their promptings: once he decreed that the Burmese should switch, overnight, to driving on the right (there were dozens of accidents); another mystic visitation, in 1986, caused him to abolish the currency and replace it with a new one in which notes were divisible by nine. When Ne Win died, in 2002, the dictatorship continued under the leadership of Than Shwe, though not without some small changes in policy, consisting mainly of a newly favorable attitude to foreign investment and tourism. Than Shwe recently gave his daughter a wedding party at which the gifts were estimated to be worth fifty million dollars—by some calculations, three times Burma's health budget. A large part of the country is in the control of warlords who may or may not be in semi-collusion with the regime and whose principal business has been the production of heroin (and now methamphetamine, for export via Thailand, where it is known as *yaba*, "crazy pills"). "What we really want," according to a Burmese Army captain, "is to change from being an isolated left-wing military dictatorship to a pro-American right-wing military dictatorship."

But though the magnitude of the Burmese disaster is clear, one can disagree about whether the British Empire's destruction of the Burmese monarchy—and the accompanying collapse of old Burmese society—bears direct responsibility for it. The British don't talk or think about their old empire much—it has vanished into the memory hole of the recent past—but if they did they might point to the fact that under their direct rule the Burmese economy thrived (colonial Burma was the largest exporter of rice in the world); that there was no civil war under the occupation; that when the British left, in 1948, it was without a fight; and that the period immediately afterward, in the nineteen-fifties, is now, as Thant notes, "looked back on as a golden age by the Burmese middle classes." On the other hand, somebody broke Burma badly enough for a military dictatorship to take over and rule for the next forty years and counting; and you don't have to be an anti-colonialist ideologue to identify the British as the likeliest culprits. Indeed, Burma is the setting of the first, and still one of the best, anti-colonialist essays, George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," an account of his experience in the British Imperial Police. It describes the cost of colonialism for the colonizer—the hollowing-out and toxic effect of ruling on the rulers. As for what the Burmese thought of Orwell, it's there in the essay's first sentence: "In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people—the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me."

One of the subtlest things in "The River of Lost Footsteps" is the connection Thant charts between Burma's current predicament and its colonial past. A deep sense of humiliation gave rise to a curdled nationalism that eventually made the military dictatorship possible. The great British experiment in regime change created a Burma that was, in Thant's words, "entirely different from anything before, a break with the ideas and institutions that had underpinned society in the Irrawaddy valley since before medieval times"—a Burma "adrift, suddenly pushed into the modern world without an anchor to the past."

Old Burma was no pacifist's paradise. Because the modern stereotype of the country is that of "a lost and dreamy backwater," as Thant observes, it comes as a surprise to realize just how violent Burmese history has always been. His book stresses the country's ethnic diversity. It has more than a hundred distinct groups, including the Shan, the Wa, and the Karen. The Burmese themselves are the most numerous of the ethnic groups, but they have by no means always been dominant; Burmese history is, in Thant's account, the story of "imperial ambitions" on the part of the various mini-states that competed to rule the country. At different points, the capital has been Ava, Bagan, Mandalay—built from scratch by the penultimate Burmese king, Mindon—and now Rangoon. (In 2005, the military dictatorship relocated the administrative capital to a compound near Pyinmana, a hitherto obscure town two hundred miles north of Rangoon. No one knows why, though the leading theories are that the rulers are frightened of an invasion or are acting on the advice of astrologers.) Burma's greatest military victory occurred in the late seventeen-sixties, in a war against what was then the most powerful country in the world, China, which launched a series of attacks only to be defeated by a combination of the experienced Burmese Army, elephants, and disease. The result, Thant writes, was that "the Burmese saw themselves now as an all-conquering race, destined to hold neighboring peoples in subjugation, an emerging equal of great powers everywhere."

A lost sense of military glory is not in itself necessarily toxic. In Burma, however, this nostalgia was combined with a vivid sense of humiliation at colonial rule, which the passing of time did nothing to weaken. The British refused, for example, to remove their shoes on entering temples and holy places—a point of elementary cultural tact which members of the colonial master race found to be beyond them. In twentieth-century Burma, the nationalist feelings that were growing all around the world became increasingly attached to dreams of reviving the historic martial spirit of the ethnic Burmese—dreams that took on a particular edge in the nineteen-thirties, as the nationalist and extremist ideas in circulation began to gain the attention of young students in Rangoon.

The impact of these ideas can be measured by the fact that Rangoon University around that time was the alma mater of Aung San, the hero of Burmese independence (and father of Aung San Suu Kyi); U Nu, the first post-independence Prime Minister of Burma; U Thant, the future Secretary-General of the United Nations (and grandfather of Thant Myint-U); Than Tun, the leader of the postwar Communist insurrection; and Ne Win, the future autocrat. These men were all, broadly speaking, middle-class; if they had been more privileged, they would have slipped without effort into administrative jobs in colonial Burma. As it was, a mixture of energy, intelligence, and exclusion from opportunity drove them to remake Burma. The Japanese, by the time they invaded, in 1942, had already scouted the brightest of the student leaders, and taken them to Tokyo for training and indoctrination. Aung San, who was preëminent among them, got a little carried away. "What we want is a strong state administration as exemplified in Germany

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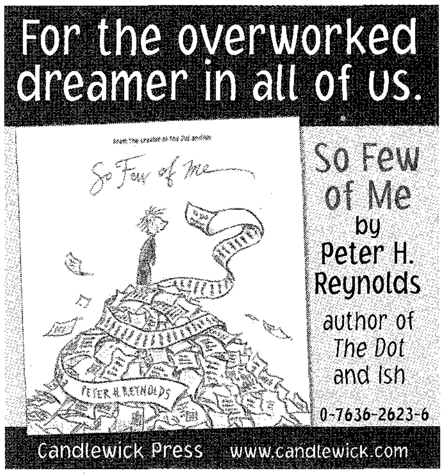
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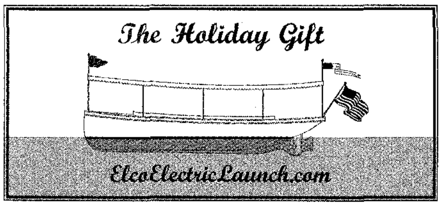
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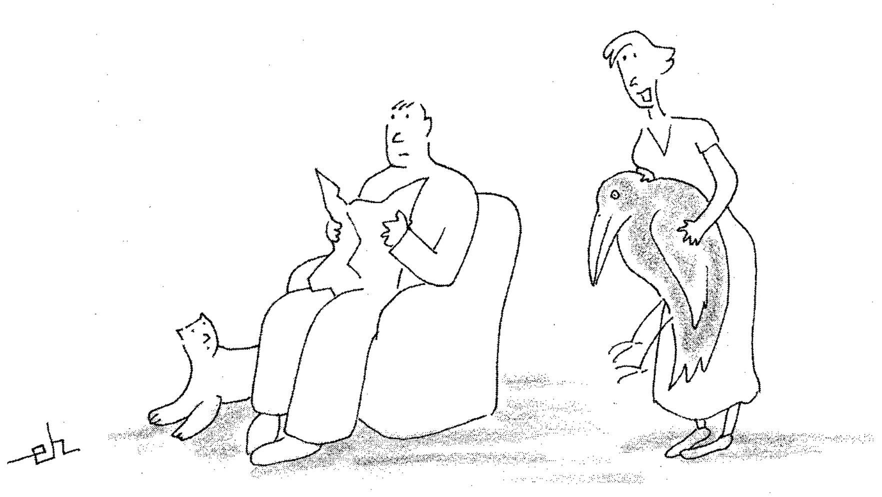
and Japan," he wrote while in Japan in 1940. "There shall be one nation, one state, one party, one leader. . . . There shall be no nonsense of individualism. Everyone must submit to the state which is supreme over the individual." Aung San and his fellow Japanese-trained fighters, known as the Thirty Comrades, cut their fingers, exchanged blood, and swore an oath of loyalty to the Burma Independence Army. They were sent to Hainan for military training and soon joined the battle against the British in Burma.

Subsequent events made Aung San the most revered figure in modern Burmese history. Although he was not a physically imposing presence, Aung San had a strange magnetism, the charisma of a man who cannot be deflected from his purpose. He led the fight for Burmese independence, first by helping the Japanese drive out the British and then, when the war had turned, by joining the fight against the (now hated) Japanese. He was the man who made it clear to the British that the only way they could hold on to Burma was by force, astutely and audaciously gambling that the British lacked the will for a protracted fight. Then, in a Cabinet meeting on July 19, 1947, Aung San was murdered, along with six other members of the interim government, by soldiers apparently acting under the orders of a right-wing political rival. As a result, his status as the martyr of Burmese independence is unchallenged—though the account of him in "The River of Lost Footsteps" contains a gentle thread of implied criticism, not so much of Aung San's actions as of the ideological currents running through them, and the places to which those currents were to carry his country.



"Here's that bird you used to see when you were drunk."

The next decade was relatively happy for Burma—with one big exception. The ever-present ethnic tensions, which had been suppressed under colonial rule, exploded into civil war between the Army, which was increasingly dominated by the ethnic Burmese, and several of the ethnic minorities. The conflict was exacerbated by the presence of the Communists, who came in several different flavors, and by the Chinese Nationalist Army; it was to become, as Thant says, "the longest-running armed conflict in the world." In parts of the country unaffected by the civil war, however, things were better than they had ever been. The British had been expelled, and the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League governed Burma with the mandate it had won in free democratic elections. Before long, however, the A.F.P.F.L. began to fall apart. "There was no clear ideological divide or really even differences over policy," Thant explains. "It was more the story of friends and colleagues who after twenty years living and working at close quarters, through war and peace, were getting tired of one another." In September, 1958, the Army stepped in, and announced that it would run the country until elections took place in December, 1960; when those elections were won by a candidate whom the generals didn't want, they stepped down from politics and prepared a second, more definitive coup, which was launched on March 2, 1962. The regime that began then is still in power today.

For the next quarter century, nobody in the rest of the world seemed to pay Burma much mind. Then, on July 23, 1988, in response to a general sense of dissatisfaction with the government, Ne Win unexpectedly announced a referendum on democratic reform and a timetable that could lead within months to multiparty democracy. He also said, "I want the entire nation, the people, to know that if in future there are mob disturbances, if the army shoots, it hits—there is no firing in the air to scare." The threat, as much as the promise, had a galvanizing effect on Burmese aspirations for democracy, which were not at all cooled when the Army acted on its promise and opened fire on crowds of protesters. Aung San Suu Kyi, who had returned from exile temporarily in order to look after her sick mother, stepped into the public light and immediately became the leading figure in the democratic movement; then the Army cracked down again, abolishing the constitution and announcing a new regime called the State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC. (That comically awful acronym—combining all the attractive features of Fleming's SMERSH and Tolkien's orcs—was replaced in 1997, on the advice of a Washington P.R. firm, with a more anodyne name, the State Peace and Development Council.) SLORC arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders of her party, the National League for Democracy, and then in 1990, for reasons no one understands, allowed more or less free elections, in which the N.L.D. won three hundred and ninety-two of four hundred and eighty-five seats, and Ne Win's party won ten. What to do? Keep everyone locked up and leave things as they are. And that, broadly speaking, has been the state of affairs ever since.

The Western world has a fairly simple line on Burma, summarized a little tartly by Thant: "The military government is bad, Aung San Suu Kyi good, and the international community needs to apply pressure on Rangoon and pressure means no aid, trade sanctions, and more isolation." A current grassroots campaign in Europe, for instance, seeks to focus attention on the gas pipeline, which is bringing the dictatorship several hundred million dollars in oil revenue, with tens of billions more to come. In September, the U.N. Security Council put Burma on its agenda, which means that members can discuss further action—which could, in principle, mean further sanctions. In the meantime, everyone from Kenneth Cole and Tommy Hilfiger to Wal-Mart and Pepsi has ended operations in Burma, and the N.L.D.'s policy of discouraging visitors to the country has not wavered since it was set out by Aung San Suu Kyi, in 1995: "We think it's too early for either tourists or investment or aid. . . . As long as new money comes in, the SLORC is under less and less incentive to change."

Thant has a different view, one informed by his own family's experiences of Burma. He grew up in Riverdale, New York, in a house that was a small piece of Burma transposed to the United States, and his first visit to his homeland was in 1974, for the funeral of his greatly beloved grandfather U Thant, who served two terms as Secretary-General of the United Nations, from 1961 to 1971. U Thant was a man of remarkable intelligence, innate reasonableness, and diplomatic balance. A former headmaster in a small town in lower Burma, he was recruited as an adviser and emissary by his old friend U Nu, the first Prime Minister of Burma. Thant's qualities were rapidly recognized by the wider world. Ne Win, who disliked all intellectuals anyway, was envious. When U Thant died, his body, accompanied by the family, was flown to Burma for burial. Ne Win wanted U Thant buried in a private ceremony; but a convoy of students interrupted the funeral procession, and demanded that U Thant be buried at the site of the former Students' Union, which had been blown up by the military during the 1962 coup. The family was moved by the intensity of feeling but was not sure that a state funeral awarded by the dictatorship would have been appropriate; the Army lost its patience; monks and students were shot; and U Thant was laid to rest in the Cantonment Garden, near the Shwedagon Pagoda, Burma's most important Buddhist site.

This episode gave Thant Myint-U an early education in the vileness and stupidity of the military dictatorship, and in the strength of feeling against the regime among ordinary Burmese. His upbringing has added to this a strong cosmopolitan streak, and a sense of the more complex and multiethnic strands to be found in Burma's past and, perhaps, in its future. "The River of Lost Footsteps" is a balanced, thorough, and serious history, but it is also a polemic, firm in its view that the current international campaign—pursuing "this policy of isolating one of the most isolated countries in the world"—is moving in the wrong direction.

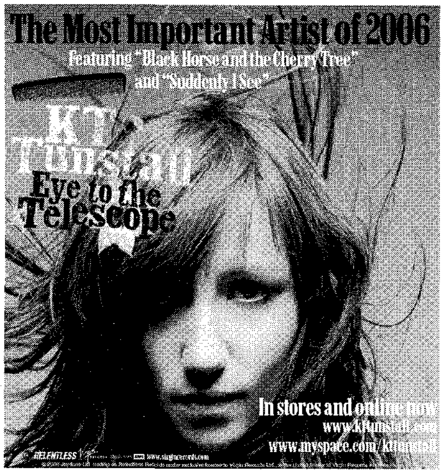
If you are an outsider, it is easy to miss just how explosive this critique is. For the grandson of U Thant, one of the most revered figures in modern Burmese history, to criticize both the hero of Burmese independence and his daughter, by far the most popular living Burmese, is a considerable act of courage. But Thant thinks that Aung San Suu Kyi—"the Lady," as she is generally known in Burma—relies too much on her father's example. Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, has her father's intensity, courage, and charisma, and perhaps also his sense of destiny; but, for Thant, that is not all that needs to be said. To assume that the same single-mindedness that won Burma's independence in 1947 will gain its freedom now is to confuse the colonial past and the postcolonial present. "Britain's withdrawal from Burma was part of its withdrawal from India; the question was one of the nature and timing of the postcolonial transition," Thant observes. "Unlike the British, Burma's generals were never going to quit Burma." Aung San Suu Kyi's valiant opposition to the military regime has become much better known, he observes, than the reasons that the regime arose in the first place, and the result is policy that rests on an incurious, ahistorical simplicity. "The paradigm is one of regime change, and the assumption is that sanctions, boycotts, more isolation will somehow pressure those in charge to mend their ways," he writes. "The assumption is that Burma's military government couldn't survive further isolation when precisely the opposite is true: Much more than any other part of Burmese society, the army will weather another forty years of isolation just fine."

There is no sign that the dictatorship, which has made deals to end the civil war and is boosted by trade with Burma's neighbors in teak as well as by its newfound gas reserves, is wobbling. "The economy that was evolving under sanctions was exactly the opposite of one that could create a strong middle class and pave the way for progressive change," Thant argues. The generals don't want to engage with the wider world, and they feel that they have little to lose through further isolation. "It is this isolation that has kept Burma in poverty; isolation that fuels a negative, almost xenophobic nationalism; isolation that makes the Burmese army see everything as a zero-sum game and any change as filled with peril; isolation that has made any conclusion to the war so elusive, hardening differences; and isolation that has weakened institutions—the ones on which any transition to democracy would depend—to the point of collapse. Without isolation, the status quo will be impossible to sustain."

Instead of the current policy, Thant argues, what is needed is a policy of engagement with Burma, one of ethical trade and ethical tourism, coupled with a gradual process of economic reform, a rebuilding of institutions, "and a slow opening up of space for civil society." Given all these things, "perhaps the conditions for political change would emerge over the next decade or two." This is not a simple policy of regime change—or not regime change as we have come to know it.

I once met someone who knew His Holiness the Dalai Lama. "He's terribly nice," she said, "but he's been a bit U.N.-ized." It seems possible that members of the Burma lobby will say something similar about Thant Myint-U, who was a U.N. official for many years, in peacekeeping and policy planning. His formula for change, one of debate and engagement and gradualism, isn't terribly fashionable, but it has the ring of authority, and it is hard to dismiss the argument that if sanctions and isolation were going to work they would have shown signs of doing so by now. "If Thailand and Indonesia had been under U.S. and European sanctions the past twenty years, they would not be democracies today," Thant writes. "Would China be better off today if it had been kept poor and isolated since the demonstrations of 1989?"

In the meantime, Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest, not far from the address on University Avenue where my parents and I briefly, and incomparably less meaningfully, shared the same condition. House arrest is all too apt a metaphor for the situation of Burma today. This helps to explain why Aung San Suu Kyi is such a powerful symbol for the Burmese: her martyrdom differs from theirs only in that it is so intense and so public and therefore so exemplary. House arrest—no one can go out, no one can come in, and it's very hard for anything ever to change, until something does. ♦



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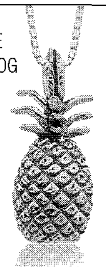
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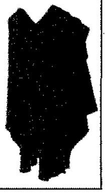
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SOUR BALL

The acid thoughts of Stephen Sondheim and David Hare.

BY JOHN LAHR

When Stephen Sondheim's "Company" débuted, in 1970, it was immediately acknowledged as a kind of musical watershed: no characters, no linear story, no happy ending. In the late fifties, Sondheim had written about everything coming up roses; now his *fleurs* were more or less *mal*. Full of lucid doubt, songs such as "The Little Things You Do Together," "Marry Me a Little," and "Sorry-Grateful" opened up a whole Pandora's box of ambivalence. The show, Sondheim's first collaboration with the director Harold Prince, which revolved around Bobby, a commitment-averse thirty-five-year-old bachelor, and his married friends, portrayed marriage as a particularly perilous adventure: "The concerts you enjoy together / Neighbors you annoy together / Children you destroy together / That keep marriage intact."

"What happened to the good-time musical?" Ethan Mordden asked rhetorically in his book "Broadway Babies." Vietnam is what happened. The culture had lost faith in both its goodness and its gladness. Sondheim's revolution was one not just of style but of soul. With this brilliantly innovative show, he replaced the American musical's gleeful sense of life with a gleeful sense of death. Behind the restless pursuit of pleasure and of distraction in "Company" was the sure knowledge that, as Sondheim observed in the song "The Ladies Who Lunch," "everybody dies." Resonating with the spiritual fallout of the war, "Company" expressed not America's big heart but its numbed one; it brought the musical up to the minute.

John Doyle's slick revival (at the Barrymore) allows a new generation of theatregoers to experience some of the show's original chilling wallop. The combination of fear and entropy that marked the Vietnam years has, if anything, been compounded by recent political events, and the shellac of Sondheim's cynicism doesn't seem dated. Here the back wall of the theatre is painted black—an effect that emphasizes the sound, not the Manhattan locale, and makes the musical feel more abstract. A Steinway is positioned at stage right; a vase of white calla lilies on top of it echoes the huge white Doric column that rises from the center of the stage like a phallic assertion of the music's potency. But the real landscape of the show is the instruments, which the actors play as they sing, and which are perched, at the opening, on revolving chairs and glass boxes.

Doyle used the same musician-performer trope last year in his thrilling revival of "Sweeney Todd." There it brought out the strength of the musical's libretto; here, despite the superb staging, it only underscores the weakness of George Furth's book. Doyle's production provides no semblance of a naturalistic environment, and the actors have little plot and no place to give them dimension. As a result, novelty stands in for personality, and "Company" is exposed as the song cycle that it really is—albeit a spectacular one. The songs themselves, which are built like mini-plays, become the scenes, which has the benefit of allowing the audience to appreciate the dramatic sinew of their structure. In "Barcelona," for instance, Sondheim conjures in terse strokes the melancholy vacancy of Bobby's sexual games. After bedding a dim stewardess named April (Elizabeth Stanley), Bobby (the excellent Raúl Esparza) feigns irritation at her having to leave for the airport; he insists that she "stay a minute," telling her, "You're a very special girl, not just overnight." Bobby's palaver is meant to convince both him and her of his decency. So, when the worm turns, it's a moment that is at once hilarious and heartbreaking:

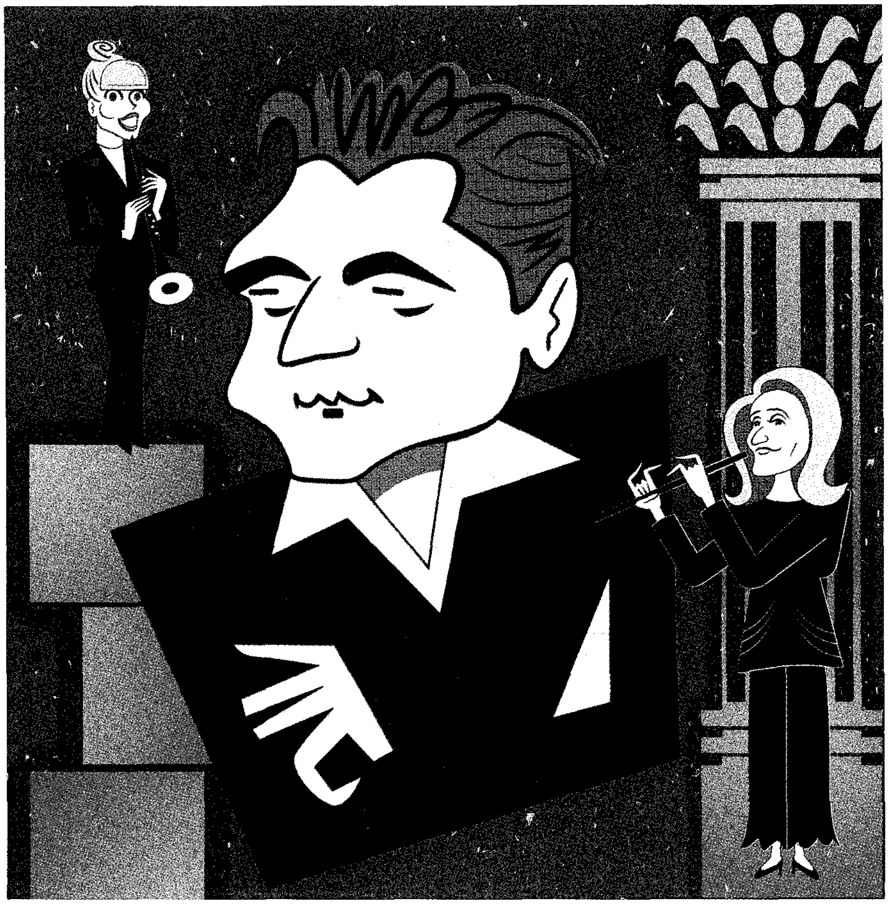
> APRIL: That's not to say
> That if I had my way . . .
> Oh well, I guess O.K.
> BOBBY: What?
> APRIL: I'll stay.
> BOBBY: But . . . Oh, God.

Sondheim's tour de force of reversal and revelation is "Getting Married Today," in which Bobby, the best man at a wedding, looks on while the bride-to-be, Amy (Heather Laws), has an astonishing, perfectly pitched hysterical meltdown. "Go, can't you go? / Look, you know / I adore you all, / But why watch me die / Like Eliza on the ice," she sings. Her emotional collapse is topped by Bobby's moral one. At one point, after she has sent her fiancé away, Bobby asks Amy to marry him instead; his desperate, craven gesture is what finally gets Amy to the altar. The song works as a sort of three-act play, which, like the musical itself, is an extraordinary show of prowess and of misery.

Doyle's theatrical conceit works best at the stately opening, during which Bobby is propped nonchalantly against the piano while the other performers, wielding instruments, troop around him, like fragments from a dream, calling his name and besieging him with concern. But, for the most part, although the songs get across, the performances lack the exhilarating clout they should have. In "You Could Drive a Person Crazy," for instance, the doo-wah fun of the Andrews Sisters pastiche ("You could drive a person crazy, / You could drive a person mad. / Doo-doo doo-doo doo") is ceded to three saxophones, whose riffs are weak tea compared with the song's original bebop daftness. For "The Ladies Who Lunch," a great number that will always be owned by Elaine Stritch, and is sung well enough here by Barbara Walsh, Doyle avoids both invidious comparison and showstopping expectation by strategically running the song directly into the ensuing dialogue, thus refusing the audience a chance to respond.

At the finale of "Company," Bobby is asked to blow out the candles on his birthday cake and make a wish. "Want something, Robert," one of his friends says. "Want *something!*" But Bobby doesn't know what he wants or how to get it. "Make me alive" is his final plea—the cry of a victim, not a hero.

By contrast, David Hare's "The Vertical Hour" (at the Music Box, under the tentative direction of Sam Mendes) circles around the heroic decision to follow one's desire and to pay the price for it. Hare is a smart and eloquent cookie.



The actors play the instruments in John Doyle's production of "Company."

ROBERT RISKO

"The Vertical Hour" is glib but not good, a sort of boulevard cocktail of contemporary concerns—terrorism, the Iraq war, the state of British and American democracies—to which he adds a dollop of Oedipal struggle, a pinch of Freud, and a dash of romantic confusion. Hare contrives to get a wary estranged Englishman named Philip (Andrew Scott) and his apparently feckless liberal doctor father, Oliver (Bill Nighy), to sit around the table with Philip's American girlfriend, Nadia (Julianne Moore, making her Broadway début), an Ivy League professor of political studies, who is also a former foreign correspondent turned pundit and apologist for the Iraq war.

If the play sounds like a bit of an intellectual hodgepodge, well, it is. Nonetheless, "The Vertical Hour" is also a sort of guilty pleasure, owing almost entirely to the expertise of Nighy, whose droll performance is a master class in theatrical poise. Nighy is tall and thin, with long, tapered fingers that seem to have a herky-jerky life of their own. Rather like an egret on a mudflat, he prowls around on his long legs with a sort of startled stillness. You don't want to take your eyes off him, and for good reason: almost every idiosyncratic tic and double take delivers the shock of truthfulness. Nighy winkles out every scintilla of irony in Hare's well-wrought words. When Nadia, after expounding on her position on Iraq, asks Oliver if he was against the war from the start, he replies, "Let's just say, I knew who the surgeon was going to be, so I had a fair idea what the operation would look like." Later, after a night spent talking in the Shropshire countryside, Oliver and Nadia negotiate a sort of spiritual truce, which proves life-changing to Nadia. "She's extraordinary," he tells his son afterward. "However, you're going to find she has what Americans call"—here Nighy flicks the syllables out and lets them dangle like a trout fisherman's fly—"*issues.*" The play may have a bewildering ending—and, sad to say, a shallow performance from Moore, who can't seem to make an emotional connection to the big concepts she mouths—but Nighy's majestic performance sheds enough light to make the evening unexpectedly memorable. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

WHAT IF?

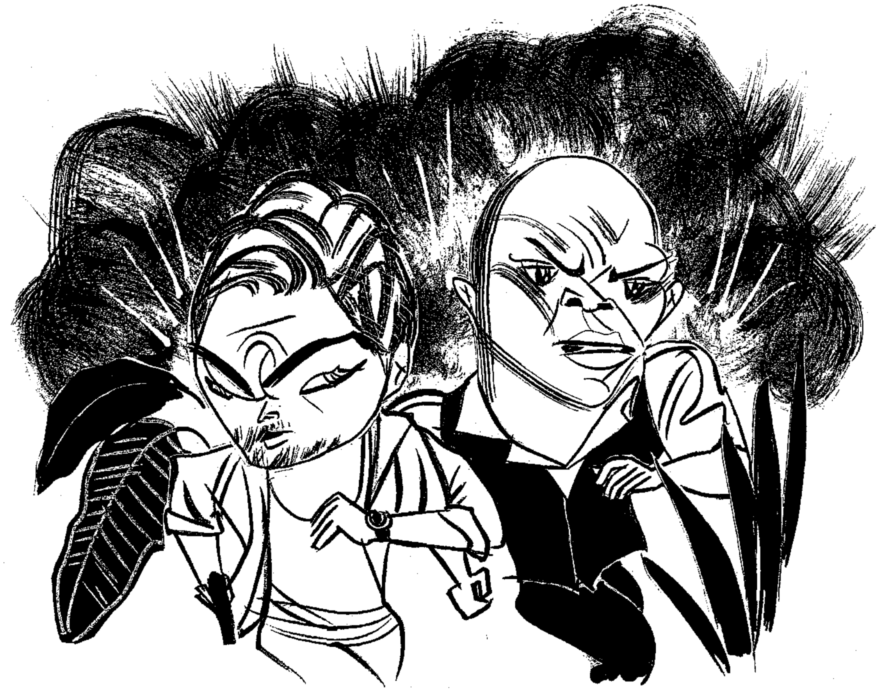
Wishing things were otherwise.

BY DAVID DENBY

Africa breaks your heart—that's the simplest and most persistent emotion that bursts out of such recent films as "Hotel Rwanda," "The Constant Gardener," "The Last King of Scotland," and, now, "Blood Diamond," the best and most enjoyable of this cycle of movies set against the background of civil wars, ethnic conflict, and Western meddling and exploitation. The earlier films, whatever their considerable virtues, were so thoroughly suffused with guilt over the West's role in Africa's misery that they left you chastened and hanging your head. But "Blood Diamond," written by Charles Leavitt, from an idea that he developed with C. Gaby Mitchell, and directed by Edward Zwick, is essentially a romantic adventure story with politics in the background—an old-fashioned movie, I suppose, but exciting and stunningly well made. In Sierra Leone, in 1999, a civil war, fuelled by the trade in "blood diamonds"—in which gems are smuggled out of the country and sold to European buyers for arms money—has been raging for years, tearing up the countryside and pulling families apart. Solomon Vandy (Djimon Hounsou), a fisherman, loses his son to the guerrilla army, the Revolutionary United Front, which press-gangs the boy into service. The R.U.F. also forces Solomon to work in the diamond fields, where he pulls a pink stone from the marshy waters. He buries it, but word gets around.

It's a very big diamond, and a smuggler named Danny Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio), a white Rhodesian by birth and a former mercenary in Angola, wants it. In the capital city of Freetown, Maddy Bowen (Jennifer Connelly), a magazine reporter, tries to cozy up to Archer so that she can get the story of how the smuggling racket works. Solomon, Danny, and Maddy all want something, and they take turns using, helping, and half trusting one another to get it, stumbling in and out of war zones as young killers rampage through the towns firing AK-47s from the backs of pickup trucks. You may sense that this tale is vaguely derivative—there are elements of "Casablanca," "The Defiant Ones," "Under Fire," and Hemingway novels woven into it—but you can enjoy what's synthetic and movieish in "Blood Diamond" without finding the film any less stirring as a portrait of Africa in chaos. "Blood Diamond" is violent and spectacular, with a steady current of sexual tension. Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Connelly ravish each other with mere glances. The picture is poised on the edge of popular romance, and that's a good place to be; Zwick does serious work there, pulling back from the obvious and digging deeper into Africa's troubles.

DiCaprio's smuggler is out of the Bogart mold—the loner working only for himself, a wounded but self-sufficient guy who's tough on women, and courageous in offhanded and improvised ways that will never reveal a moral intention. DiCaprio may not be Bogart, but he's no longer dewy: he's still got the golden hair and the blue eyes, but the cat-faced features that drove girls nuts in "Titanic" have thickened slightly, and his voice is lower and more biting. The savory, English-flecked patois in which he converses with the thugs is delightful, and there's a ready humor in his open enjoyment of deceit, bribery, and dirty deals. Connelly, who has stroked the brow of too many suffering males in the past, is openly flirtatious and avid this time. Maddy uses her looks to get men to talk. She's tired of writing sensitive, useless pieces about African victims; she's willing to trade a night in bed for a fresh story, but it had better be a good one. Seducing DiCaprio and putting him off at the same time, Connelly suddenly seems like a movie star, not a warm-eyed soul mate. Djimon Hounsou's bereaved father, too anguished to play games with these flirtatious highfliers, keeps the movie's moral sense firmly in place.



Leonardo DiCaprio and Djimon Hounsou in Edward Zwick's "Blood Diamond."

TOM BACHTELL

The director, the producers, and the writers are conscientious liberals; they let us know that every time a valuable natural resource has been discovered in Africa—whether it's ivory, gold, or diamonds—white Europeans have hired surrogates to plunder the goods, and the Africans have suffered terribly. ("Let's hope they don't discover oil here," a wardazed old man says.) But the filmmakers don't preach at us; they work out the social meanings and the controlling economic interests through action. "Blood Diamond" is Zwick's best movie. He has jettisoned the noble clichés of "Glory," the grandstanding of "The Siege," the embarrassing solemn antics of Tom Cruise besting the Japanese at swordplay in "The Last Samurai." Like a proficient Hollywood director from sixty years ago, he has found the right balance between star glamour and social conscience. The scenes of rampage and slaughter, shot with a handheld camera that plunges the spectator into the middle of the action, are both nerve-racking and saddening. As the three companions move around the country, the traces of civil conflict—the human and physical wrecks left in the wake of the struggle—become increasingly nightmarish. And, without sensationalizing, Zwick shows us the workings of a recurring phenomenon that goes beyond heartbreak to the most sordid tragedy: the way warlords give boys a sense of power with guns, liquor, and drugs, and turn them into joyous killers.

At the beginning of "Déjà Vu," the new thriller directed by Tony Scott and produced by Jerry Bruckheimer—a veteran pair of pyromaniacs, if there ever was one—five hundred and forty-three men, women, and children board the Alvin Stumpf ferry in New Orleans and, halfway across the Mississippi, get blown sky high by a terrorist. The ferry explodes into a fireball, and Scott, working in slow motion, sends the bodies, some of them in flames, shooting into the air and then plummeting into the river. He makes beautiful pictures out of carnage. The sequence is sickening, but my problem with it goes beyond the usual charge of exploitation. It turns out that the scene is positioned as an opening gambit in a complicated scheme that mixes detection and science fiction. The screenwriters, Bill Marsilii and Terry Rossio, create an ace A.T.F. investigator (Denzel Washington) who gets some major help catching the terrorist. Government scientists use a super-potent time machine to send him spinning back to the recent past, where he has a chance to prevent both the mass deaths and the murder of a beautiful young woman (Paula Patton). The time-travel plot raises an old metaphysical question: Can there be an alternative to what has taken place, a substitute stream of actuality? Such wan hopes always come off as both haunting and childish. Haunting because we all have dreams: If I had acted differently at a certain point in my life, wouldn't everything afterward have been changed? Childish because in life, alas, there is only the dread or happy finality of what is.

Movies, too, have fixed narratives, with screenwriters and directors playing God and assigning fates to their characters. At the moment, however, a number of filmmakers are toying with the idea of overturning narrative destiny. The recent "Stranger Than Fiction" makes a charming joke out of the entire matter. Will Ferrell, in the role of a man who is the quintessence of dullness—an I.R.S. agent who counts out his life in bytes—suddenly hears a woman's voice in his head, narrating his thoughts and acts. It is the voice of Emma Thompson, who plays a novelist writing a book about him. The question for Ferrell's Everyman is: Does the novelist control his actions? Is he nothing more than a character to be disposed of as she pleases, even killed off? Or will he become the hero of his own life? Ferrell has the good luck to fall in with Maggie Gyllenhaal, playing a tattooed free spirit who would give any man a reason to be a hero, and with Dustin Hoffman, as a manic literature professor who tells Will that the only narrative possible for him is the one he creates for himself. Prisoner, break your chains: the author-God can be overthrown.

"Stranger Than Fiction," like "Déjà Vu," lays alternate versions of the same event on top of one another. Movies can perform this sort of sleight of hand all too easily. In two recent films about professional magicians, "The Illusionist" and "The Prestige," bodies disappear, apparitions take form onstage, and so on. Simple enough—even a bit glib. A real magician depends on the unity of time and space to make his tricks convincing; a movie disposes of such unities with a cut. In brief, I felt cheated by these clever, narrative-disrupting films. They seem to miss the point. After all, every fiction film is magical—an artifice devoted to "What if?" Movies exist in two dimensions, with a third only implied; they jump all over the place, eliding the tedium of days and hours. A story that successfully combines character, the infinite surfaces of the world, and the values that we live by into a coherent whole is a miracle—and harder to bring off than any of these well-made but slyly irresponsible movies. ♦

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Volume LXXXII, No. 41, December 11, 2006. The New Yorker (ISSN 0028-792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: Jan. 23 & 30, Feb. 13 & 20, July 10 & 17, Aug. 7 & 14, Dec. 25 & Jan. 1) by The Condé Nast Publications, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: The Condé Nast Building, 4 Times Square, New York, NY 10036. Louis Cona, vice-president and publisher; Jamie Engel, associate publisher; Alatia Bradley, advertising director; Karen Quinn-Panzer, advertising director; Melissa McCarthy Strome, advertising director; Judy Safir, director of finance and business operations; Daniella Wells, executive director marketing & strategic planning; Janine Silvera, executive director of creative services; Jacqueline Cinguina, director of integrated marketing; Steve Porter, creative director/advertising; Ellen Reid, creative services director; Lynn Oberlander, general counsel. Advance Magazine Publishers Inc.: S. I. Newhouse, Jr., chairman; Charles H. Townsend, president and C.E.O.; John W. Bellando, executive vice-president and C.O.O.; Jill Bright, executive vice-president–human resources; John Buese, executive vice-president–chief information officer; David Orlin, senior vice-president–strategic sourcing; Robert Bennis, senior vice-president–real estate; Maurie Perl, senior vice-president–chief communications officer. Shared services provided by Advance Magazine Group: Steven T. Florio, Advance Magazine Group vice chairman; David B. Chemidlin, senior vice-president–general manager, shared services center. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. R123242885. Canada Post return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: P.O. Box 874, Station Main, Markham, ON L3P 8L4.

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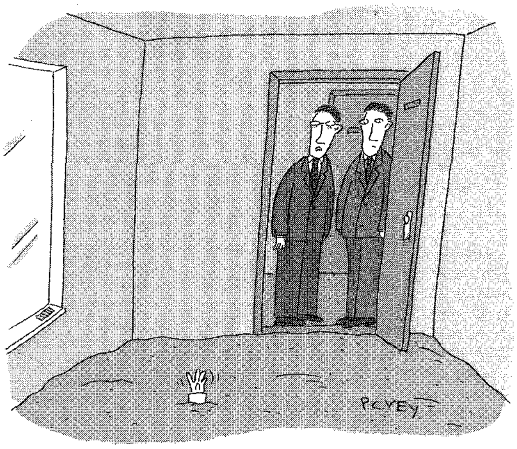
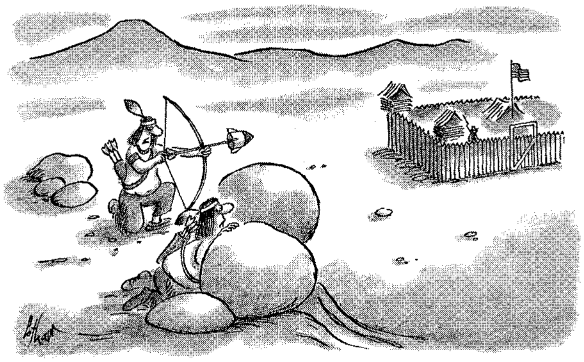
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Michael Crawford, must be received by Sunday, December 10th. Finalists in the November 27th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the December 25th & January 1st issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Of course, the current tenant will be gone before the first of the month."
Stephen Gelb, Teaneck, N.J.



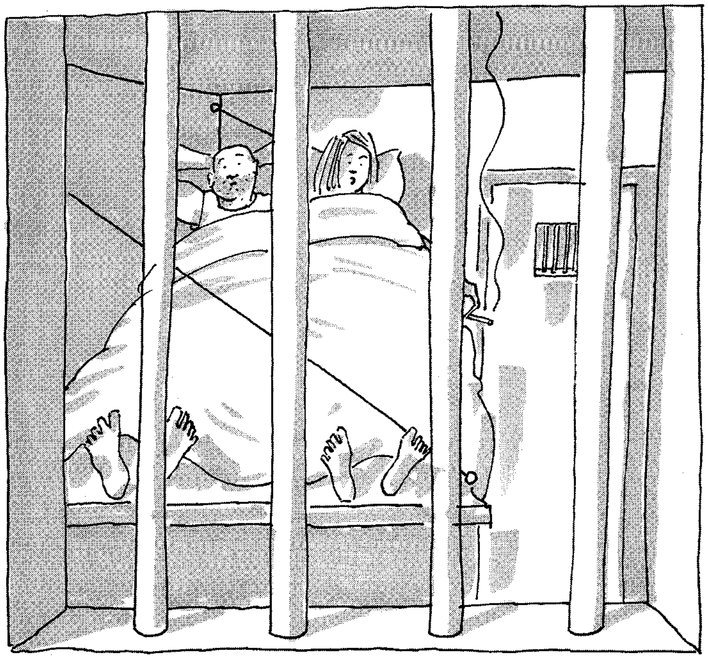
THE FINALISTS

"It better work—they sold it to us."
Paul Denning, San Francisco, Calif.

"Our medicine man went to M.I.T."
William Bildersee, New York City

"If this doesn't work, push that boulder and run like hell."
Cynthia Rogers, Palo Alto, Calif.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



" ____ "

PETER
KRAUSE
JULIANNA
MARGULIES

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the lost room

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